
EUDORA WELTY AND ANTON CHEKHOV: A LONG INTIMACY BETWEEN STRANGERS

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The article using concrete examples from Welty's stories deals with influence of A.P. Chekhov on E. Welty (1909—2001). Reading and rereading Chekhov resulted in writing "Reality in Chekhov's stories" (1979) which has become a landmark in US studies of Chekhov. Russian writer's prose influenced Welty's use and love for detail, priority for dialogue, metaphors, symbols, simplifying and even eliminating of the plot, desire for brevity. Stylistic similarities reflect Chekhov's and Welty's affinity for such cornerstone concepts of human existence as life, death, love, human dignity and justice.

Key words: E. Welty, A.P. Chekhov, prose, style, poetics.

Eudora Welty loved to quote Henry Green [1. P. 282; 2. P. 101] who said that "prose should be a long intimacy between strangers". This quote is fully applicable to E. Welty's long-standing interest in Chekhov. She did read Chekhov all her life and whenever asked by interviewers about her favorite authors and the major influences in her life she never failed to mention her love and appreciation of the Russian writer. In the videotaped interview conducted by Patricia Wheatley in the spring of 1986 when asked if she had authors she was passionate about Eudora Welty said: "Oh, yes. The ones I return to again and again. Well — I love Chekhov, I think, above everyone in the world, and keep going back to read him." [2. P. 135].

In her 1972 interview to Linda Kuegel, Welty shared that Louis Kronenberg approached her with a request to write an essay about either Jane Austen or Chekhov for an anthology he was editing and though Welty felt that Chekhov was more "kindred", she felt closer to him in spirit, she ended up writing about Jane Austen. The reason she did not write about Chekhov that time was the language: "I couldn't read Russian, which I felt whoever wrote about him should be able to do" [1. P. 74—75].

In May 1977 Cornell University invited Welty to discuss Chekhov and participate in Chekhov's festival held at campus. It was there that Welty was reintroduced to her sponsor, Professor James McConkey, himself a writer and a student of Chekhov [3. P. 426]. This was the beginning of a fellowship which lasted for a long time. The festival and the lecture Welty gave was one of the incentives to reread Chekhov. For Welty it was "pure bliss... — reading Chekhov was just like angels singing to me" she said in an interview to Todd Freeman later on the same year [1. P. 195].

During my visit to Welty's House in Jackson, Miss. in September of 2009 I asked about Chekhov's books in her library. I was given a list of 30 items which included all major translations and publications of Chekhov done in the United States during the 20th century. I was also shown two books by J. McConkey. One was *The Novels of E.M. Forster* inscribed "For Eudora Welty, with appreciation and affection. Jim McConkey, May 6, 1977 (the last day of the Chekhov festival)". The other book was edited

by McConkey. *Chekhov and Our Age: Responses to Chekhov by American Writers and Scholars*, which contained Welty's essay "Reality in Chekhov's Stories", written in 1977 and based on the above-mentioned lecture about Chekhov.

Furthermore the fact that Welty declared "Chekhov to be one of us — so close to today's world, to my mind, and very close to the South" [1. P. 74—75], and this declaration together with her essay on this writer are both quoted in the recent three-volume fundamental study on Chekhov published by the Russian Academy of Sciences [4. P. 679, 722], gives Welty worldwide credit in the field of Chekhovian criticism.

Eudora Welty's essays on other writers are revealing about her own work, often being used by researchers for a better understanding of this author's fiction. In "Looking with Eudora Welty" Ruth M. Vande Kieft points out that the essay on Chekhov and all the other pieces included into *The Eye of the Story* (1978) reveal a lot about Eudora Welty: "we have all the pleasures of recognition, knowing how much of what she finds remarkable or valuable in others' work appears in her own" [5. P. 236].

Choice characterizes — whatever one chooses speaks very eloquently about the person who is making the choice, sometimes revealing things that lie very deep within. When asked what it was that she appreciated in Chekhov, Eudora Welty mentioned "singularity" and "individuality" in people, "his sense of family" and "his Russian humor". Aren't these the things that were of primary importance for the U.S. writer as well? Reading into Welty's essay we find how important truth, reality and unreality in life and in the story are for her, how perception of different views of reality led her to revolutionize the short story. What matters for Welty in Chekhov's fiction is the "dignity and purity of singularity", "human intractability", "*human incongruity*" [6. P. 64—65].

Both Chekhov and Welty were reproached by some contemporaries for not crusading. "Must the Novelist Crusade?" (1978) holds Welty's answer putting the novelist and the crusader on opposite sides. Welty notices that Chekhov does not crusade, pass judgments and his characters are not labels: "Thus he dared to make himself free to enter the body, the spirit, mind and heart of a character, and free of any crippling wish to use him as a spokesman for himself, or as a moral example, or as a scapegoat. In the writing of his stories he conscientiously yielded only to the authority of his feelings for human beings as human beings" [6. P. 69].

Welty calls Chekhov "the least self-obtrusive of story writers [since] — it was his plainest intention that we never should hear him telling us what we should think or feel or believe. He is not trying to teach us, through his characters; he only asks us to understand them" [6. P. 68]. This is Welty's creed — she is never preaching or moralizing. The assassination of Medgar Evers which shocked her, resulted in "Where is the Voice Coming From?" (1963), a story written from the murderer's point of view and leaving any judgment to the reader. There is no dramatic sentimentality — the narration is as objective and non-didactic as possible.

All the reading and thinking about Chekhov and his prose influenced Welty's style and poetics. And sure enough many writers and critics compared Welty to Chekhov. Reynolds Price commented that "In no other writer's mind since Tolstoy and Chekhov do I hear a more godly patience humming, like the sound at the hub of an entire galaxy, circling the night." [7. P. xii]

On the other hand, in “Eudora Welty: Visited and Revisited”, R.M. Vande Kieft says: “I count Eudora Welty’s effectiveness in tragedy and comedy, satire, fantasy, sometimes “pure”, sometimes “mixed” (or “streaked” as I like to think of it). In this respect she is like the greatest modern writers, such as Chekhov or Beckett, masters of “mixed” forms.” [8. P. 30] Besides J.N. Gretlund states: “Welty and Chekhov share not only certain technical abilities but “a way of looking at ordinary events and people... and a way of writing of private joys and sorrows.” Both “insist on one message: enjoy the gift that is life; never waste life” [9. P. 107—118]. Some other studies which address Chekhov’s stylistic influence on Welty aim to “explore a dominant parallel apparent in the short fiction of both writers, in treating wanderers and those who stray.” [10. P. iv]

Looking at the prose of both writers one recognizes the same love for detail, the same attention to and priority for dialogue, and the similarity in the use of images and symbols. There are also several striking occurrences of Chekhov’s themes and images in Welty’s prose. I tried to do the “detective work” Welty mentioned in her conversation with John Griffin Jones (1981):

“Jones: were there any great influences?”

Welty: I do not know John. I never can put finger on these things for sure. Of course I was influenced. I love to read, and I adore what I read. You know that it’s worked on me. But not in any specific way I can think of, not in any immediate ways when I work. I can just do some detective work after the fact. I must have learned this or that from this or that person; but not consciously.” [1. P. 324]

Let us look at some of such occurrences with greater detail. In Chekhov’s “Duel” (1891) a young deacon is talking about faith and gives as an example the attitude of one of his relatives: “You say you have faith,” said the deacon. “What sort of faith is it? Why, I have an uncle, a priest, and he believes so that when in time of drought he goes out into the fields to pray for rain, he takes his umbrella and leather overcoat for fear of getting wet through on his way home. That’s faith!” [11. P. 88]. Miss Hattie Purcell, the rainmaker, from “ladies in Spring” (1955) is doing something very similar — she brings down rain which is often so desperately needed in the South of the U.S. Miss Hattie is a “credit to Royals”, the little place in Mississippi, where she is from, people are proud of her, as much as Chekhov’s deacon is proud of his uncle. Hattie Purcell trusts her ability to bring rain and so do the inhabitants of her small town; she takes no chances and is well prepared for the rain which is sure to follow: “Her black coat was a roomy winter one and hung down in the back to her ankles, when it didn’t catch on things. She was carrying, like a rolling pin, a long furled umbrella... Miss Hattie brought rain by sitting a vigil of the necessary duration besides the nearest body of water, as everybody knew.” [12. P. 626]. All the components present in Chekhov’s character: “faith”, “prayer”, “coat” and “umbrella” reappear in Welty’s story and they are easily recognized, even though in a different cultural situation they look different: “vigil”, “coat”, “umbrella”. According to several English dictionaries the word “vigil” evokes both “faith” and “prayer”. Miss Hattie lives in a different pragmatic context and though she worked at the local post-office she, she “calls herself a rainmaker”, besides she is assertive, speaking in a “professional voice”, she is sure and she knows. Chekhov’s theme is certainly ob-

vious in Welty's story, apart from the historical and cultural differences, since more than 65 years separate these texts.

The white heron in "A Still Moment" (1943) is one of the most poetic images created by Welty. The story relies on very specific facts about the nineteenth-century Natchez Trace and the men who travelled through it — Lorenzo Dow, John Murrell and John James Audubon. There is no historiographical evidence that these three men met in the wanderings, and Welty could not bring them together without distorting the factual truth. So she uses a bird to capture the eye of the travelers and to give them a momentary sense of union with the natural world and with each other [12. P. 63]. White herons are a common sight in the South and even nowadays can be often seen in the swamps and marshes of Mississippi and Louisiana. The similarity to the real bird is stressed by the exact description of how the bird feeds. In the story it is Audubon, the renowned ornithologist, who "watches it steadily" and notices that "When it feeds it muddies the water with its foot. Compare the passage with the description in *Peterson Field Guide to All the Birds of Eastern and Central North America*: "When feeding [it] rushes about, shuffling feet to stir up food" [13. P. 102]. Gradually, though, Welty's heron acquires qualities that transform it into a symbol that reminds the attentive reader of Chekhov's seagull.

Welty's story underlines the bird's isolation: "a solitary snowy heron flew down not far away and began to feed beside the marsh water"; "It was a snowy heron alone out of its flock"; "the heron was all its solitude, its total beauty" [12. P. 235, 236, 238]. Besides its loneliness being stressed several times in the above-quoted passages, the bird is personified through the adjective 'shy' ("one snowy, shy bird in the marshes" [12. P. 237]. In Chekhov's play *Nina Zarechny* is a lonely girl orphaned by the early death of her mother and by the fact that her father has deprived her of all the heritage. Nobody in her immediate family understands and supports her, she is not like the rest in her flock

Welty's bird is the embodiment of beauty and it is likened to a girl in bridal clothing: "Fixed in its pure white profile it stood in the precipitous moment, a plumed on its head, its breeding dress extended in rays" [12. P. 236]. These qualities become synonyms of moral purity and innocence. In fact, one may argue that the whiteness of the bird becomes 'luminous', and is associated with the source of light, being described by one of the characters as God's love that "has come visible" [12. P. 235].

Nina in Chekhov's play is wearing a white dress: "Trigorin to Nina: "I think of you as I saw you that sunny day... a week ago when you had on your white dress...we were talking...a white sea gull was lying on the bench beside us" [14. P. 39]. Nina's purity leaves Trigorin heavyhearted "Why is it I seem to feel sadness in that call from a *pure* soul, and my heart aches so with pity?" [14. P. 45]. Nina is the symbol of love "that's young and beautiful, and is all poetry, and carries us away into a world of dreams" [14. P. 46].

There are three people looking at the white heron in Welty's story, likewise there are three characters looking and talking about the white seagull, the bird Nina compares herself with: "She always signed herself the sea gull" [14. P. 57]. Treplev, who "was

low enough today to kill the sea gull” sees the bird as the omen of his own future suicide — “it is the way I’ll soon end my life” [14. P. 30]. Trigorin struck by an idea for a short story makes a note in his book: “a young girl, one like you, has lived all her life beside a lake; she loves the lake like a sea gull and is happy and free like a sea gull. But by chance a man comes, sees her, and out of nothing better to do, destroys her, like this sea gull here” [14. P. 36].

The life of Chekhov’s bird is taken away, there is nobody and nothing to defend it. Likewise Welty’s heron is “defenseless in the world except for the intensity of life” [12. P. 236]. The lonely sea gull from the lake is killed and then stuffed: “Shamraeff to Trigorin: “Somehow or other Konstantin Gavrilovich shot a sea gull, and you asked me to have it stuffed for you.” [14. P. 62]. Nina’s trust is abused: “I am a sea gull. Do you remember you shot a sea gull?” [14. P. 67]. Welty’s heron is also killed by Audubon who walks away with its still warm body in order to use it as a model for his drawings. “Welty used actual quotations from Audubon’s journals.” [15. P. 62]. He shot the birds, stuffed them and then posed them before painting.

Since linguistically gender is not expressed as obviously in English as in Russian, Welty stressed the fact that the bird is female, as Audubon had already suspected. Moreover / Additionally Welty compares the heron to the moon in another striking parallelism with Chekhov’s symbolism. This becomes obvious when we compare both texts. In “A Still Moment” “[Audubon] had thought [the heron] to be female, just as one sees the moon as female; and so it was” [12. P. 238]. The bird is a female in a snowy white bridal dress, it is defenseless, lonely, shy and pure, and it is described as the embodiment of Beauty and Love. It is also worth noticing that at the end of the story the rising moon takes on all the qualities of the heron: “Then the sun dropped below the tees, and the new moon, slender and white, hung shyly in the west.” [12. P. 240] In a close reading of Chekhov’s play we realize that the images used to describe the female protagonist are echoed in Welty’s text: “Vista opens across the lake. Low on the horizon the moon hangs, reflecting the water. Nina Zarechny all on white, seated on a rock.”; “Vainly now the pallid moon doth light her lamp. In the meadows the cranes wake and cry no longer.” [14. P. 13]

The similarity between Welty’s and Chekhov’s imagery becomes striking when we look at the passage where Nina offers her life to Trigorin. Before they part Nina gives Trigorin a medal with the engraving “If you ever need my life, come and take it.” Trigorin repeats the line “If you ever, ever need my life, come and take it.” [14. P. 45]. Compare with Welty’s “But before them the white heron rested in the grasses... flight closed in its body, the circuit of its beauty closed in its body, a bird seen and a bird still, its motion calm as if it were offered: Take my flight...” [12. P. 236] Chekhov’s “take my life” rhymes with Welty’s “take my flight” and makes the similarity complete.

The seagull and the white heron are poetic symbols used by two writers in different historic and cultural situation, these birds are described by similar qualifiers, as we have seen, and both embody Love, offering themselves in their beauty and innocence. Both end up being killed and stuffed, proving that the ever evading mystery of life is far from being solved.

There are many more Chekhovian traits in Welty's texts. For instance even the single usage of the word "steppe" which appears in Welty's story "No Place for You, My Love" (1955) reminds one of Chekhov: "He regarded the great sweep — like steppes, like moors, like deserts (all of which were imaginary to him); but more than it was like any likeness, it was South." [12. P. 577]

Comparative studies over the years have shown that the dialogue between writers from different nationalities is one of the indispensable conditions for world literature to develop [16]. It is interesting to note that Chekhov was inspired by U.S. literature when he wrote the "Steppe" (1888). Indeed, a few months before he started working on this piece Chekhov had finished reading Thoreau's *Walden* (the Russian translation read by him appeared in 1887) and there is a very convincing study by R.W. Mathewson that traces several similarities between these renowned pieces of literature. On the other hand Chekhov inspired and influenced many U.S. writers. David Maxwell's review gives a very thorough picture of Chekhov's impact on the development of literature and theatre in the U.S.A.

"Reality in Chekhov's stories" is very enlightening both about Chekhov and about Welty and her fiction. She did understand his works and if there were ever two writers who can be called soul mates it is certainly these two. Whoever undertakes the study of Welty's cosmic vision, her treatment of vital topics such as Nature, Love, Beauty, Truth and the mystery of Life and Death will find a lot of similarities with the style and cosmogony that animates the texts of the Russian writer. Eudora Welty is Anton Chekhov's counterpart in a different time-space continuum, she is part of the Chekhovian tradition known for its humanist penchant and its appreciation of the unique gift of life, that "shows us in fullness and plentitude the mystery of our lives", "searching for the truth that is inside it" [6. P. 81].

The essay about Chekhov, written "out of the fellow feeling for fiction writers" [1. P. 228] is a little germ that spreads its radiant beams into two directions — towards Chekhov and Welty herself. This text is the embodiment of what Welty thought literary criticism should be — an honest attempt to understand, since, to conclude with the author's words: "I'm really trying to get at what I think they were trying to do. I am not trying to take something here and put it there; I am trying to understand what *they* did. I like it when someone writes that way about me" [1. P. 228].

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ЮДОРА УЭЛТИ И АНТОН ЧЕХОВ: ДОЛГАЯ БЛИЗОСТЬ МЕЖДУ НЕЗНАКОМЦАМИ

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В статье на конкретных примерах рассматривается влияние творчества А.П. Чехова на творчество Ю. Уэлти (1909—2000). Чтение и неоднократное перечитывание произведений А.П. Чехова имели своим результатом не только написание знакового в американском чеховедении эссе «Реальность в рассказах Чехова» (1979), но и своеобразную трансформацию особенностей чеховской поэтики в художественной прозе Уэлти. Общее просматривается в использовании художественной детали, построении диалога, роли и функции слова «казаться», метафорах, символических упрощениях и даже устранении фабулистического элемента, стремлении к лаконичности. Стилистическое сходство отражает родственность Уэлти взглядам Чехова на такие краеугольные понятия человеческого существования, как жизнь, смерть, любовь, человеческое достоинство, справедливость.

Ключевые слова: Ю. Уэлти, А.П. Чехов, проза, стиль, поэтика.