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Mikhail Chekhov and Anthroposophy.

The beginning of the way

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It would seem that everything is more or less well with the study of Mikhail Chekhov's creative heritage in Russia. We really have something to be proud of. The two-volume book of Mikhail Chekhov's literary heritage, prepared by a team of compilers under the general scientific editorship of M.O. Knebel, was published in 1986. Whatever remarks may be evoked in particular, right, there is nothing like it in the world. After all, in English-speaking culture, for example, where Michael Chekhov is revered as a teacher of Marilyn Monroe, Yul Brynner and other celebrities and almost do not know as an actor, republish different versions of his "Actor's Technique", but even "The Way of the Actor" has not yet been published. The work of the "gentle and strange genius" (P.A. Markov) falls within the framework of the general utilitarian approach, when the shelf of manuals is getting longer and the shelf of meanings is getting shorter. But the assimilation of "technique" in isolation from the creative personality of the author is fraught with fundamental misunderstanding.

However, even in the new supplemented reprint of the two-volume book not everything was included. The influence of anthroposophy and Rudolf Steiner's personality on the worldview, art and fate of Mikhail Chekhov remains one of the key and at the same time most obscure topics. There are still too many prejudices and predeterminations in the

existing diversity of opinions on this subject. Some consider anthroposophy to be Mikhail Chekhov's savior, bringing him out of his spiritual crisis and, perhaps, saving him from madness, opening new paths in art. Others are equally certain that Rudolf Steiner, with his sophisticated rationalism, ruined the spontaneous genius of Mikhail Chekhov. But both of these assertions are still not based on any serious research into the question. This publication does not pretend to be a study either. Without prejudging any conclusions, we see our task not in resolving this dispute, but in expanding its factual territory. Mikhail Chekhov's letters, addressed to his longtime friend Victor Alexeevich Gromov, provide a serious, in our opinion, opportunity for this. Although it would seem that what is so significant is contained in these letters. Why read the abstract of the book, when now you can read the book if you want. But that is the point, that the abstract is written by Mikhail Chekhov and abstracts the text of the very Rudolf Steiner, to whose ideas he will remain faithful for the rest of his life. In this sense, Mikhail Chekhov's letters provide a unique opportunity to look into the laboratory of the creator when everything is still fermenting in it and everything is not settled.

Chekhov's writings give us an opportunity to enter the stream of spiritual quests of the Russian intelligentsia, hidden under the ideological shell, which already in the 20's was quite rigidly restraining cultural life.

Michael Chekhov's metany did not lie purely in the realm of consciousness, when the ups and downs of the spirit are not reflected in any way in the daily routine. He was a holistic type characteristic of 19th and early 20th century Russia, when general questions of existence and existential search for meaning are inseparable from everyday behavior and professional problems. In the case of Mikhail Chekhov, this wholeness was not a patriarchal, originally given, but a tragic theme of

life. His thirst for unity could not put up with the principle of "Caesar's things to Caesar and God's things to God," which in these years became a philosophy of survival for many. But the same principle was also hardly tolerated by Soviet society, which needed "the whole man".

One can look at the letters from another angle. In a short period of time, Mikhail Chekhov translates into the language of Russian theatrical culture, embodies in the elements of native speech new concepts of scientific-theoretical thought and applied searches of high non-mercantile and non-politicized Europe.

In the chronicle of Mikhail Chekhov's acquaintance with anthroposophy, much remains to be clarified. But one thing is already clear that Chekhov's impersonal phrase "I came across a little book in which the author expounds his views on the theater" does not at all indicate that the author's name is an empty sound for the artist. Chekhov's evasiveness is inscribed in the general style of his correspondence, based on implication, such crossing out of ideologically dubious words that allow the addressee to decipher these words, a style born of uncertainty about the secrecy of the correspondence. Especially since the GPU, as Chekhov remarked, "has already begun to take an interest in my 'mystical adventures'"¹ . Even the word "little book" itself looks almost like a euphemism here, for it concealed a solid volume.

Interest in anthroposophy spontaneously was prepared by a passion for yoga, which he was "captured in his youth, starting at about 20 years of age. Vakhtangov and I, - writes the actor, - studied them [yogis - *V.I.*] together (although the word "studied" would perhaps be too serious and responsible <...> we were *interested*, yogis deeply concerned us)"² . Chekhov's testimony brings us back to the time of the creation of the First Studio of the Art Theater (1912-1913), with which Stanislavsky pinned his hopes for the laboratory development of the still emerging "system".

It is in these years Stanislavsky himself is fond of yoga and fascinates students, using in his practice such concepts as "prana", "ray emission", "concentration".

One should be cautious about the artist's words that he first heard Steiner's name from Stanislavsky³. Memory aberration cannot be ruled out here. In Stanislavsky's legacy there are no traces of his contact, direct or indirect, with anthroposophy. Moreover, there were no people in his circle who could have told him anything about it. The great director was too rooted in the middle of life, in the middle of culture, to look beyond the edge, and intellectual constructs, even the most exciting ones, were, at least in this period, organically alien to him. True, the anthroposophist M.A. Skryabin, wife of V.N. Tatarinov, who died in 1989, said that K.S. Stanislavsky used exercises from Steiner's book "How to Reach Higher Worlds" when developing his system. But no documents confirming her later oral recollections could not be found.

Let's return to the artist's memoirs: "once, passing by the showcase of the bookshop of writers, my eye accidentally fell on the title of the book: "How to Achieve Knowledge of the Higher Worlds" by Rudolf Steiner". The title caused a chuckle, but the book "still bought, read and, although I put it aside, but without irony"⁴.

Steiner's book entitled "The Path to Initiation, or How to Achieve Knowledge of the Higher Worlds" was published in Kaluga back in 1911. The second, Moscow edition, which was called exactly as Chekhov remembers, according to the "Book Chronicle", was published in a large, almost mass circulation (5000) for that time and was received by the editorial office in June 1918. Most likely, the book arrived to "Knizhnaya Annals" with a delay and was on sale since early spring. Thus a copy with a gift inscription of A.S. Petrovsky, a friend of Andrei Bely, with the date March 15 (28), 1918, was preserved. Taking into account that Mikhail

Chekhov was a bookish man and visited the Bookshop quite often, and that Steiner's book was exhibited in the window as a novelty, we can say with a sufficient measure of certainty that the artist first became acquainted with anthroposophy in the spring of 1918.

M.A. Chekhov's later correspondence with the German philosopher and anthroposophist Michael Bauer (1871-1929) contains a passage that requires comment. In a letter dated 1928 to a German publisher, M. Bauer mentioned: "You already know the series of lectures on the Apocalypse, which I had in mind. How marvelous that it was the first thing you were acquainted with in Moscow"⁵ .

The cycle of lectures on the Apocalypse occupies a special place in Steiner's legacy. It provides from a certain point of view the esoteric quintessence of anthroposophy, which could not be perceived and understood outside the wide range of problems of the "science of spirit". The course was delivered by Steiner in 1908 before the members of the Theosophical Society. The lithographed course of lectures was intended exclusively for members of the society and was not sold in stores. In Moscow, the lectures were translated and printed in several typewritten copies available in the library of the Russian Anthroposophical Society (RAO). There is, of course, the theoretical possibility that some anthroposophist acquaintance gave Chekhov one of the copies to read. Yet given the serious attitude to "reading" that existed in this milieu, the likelihood that a complete layman was given the opportunity to familiarize himself with a series of lectures on the Apocalypse is extremely small. And it is unlikely that such an important text could have been quietly put aside and forgotten by Chekhov for some time. There is reason to believe that we are dealing with an inaccurate translation, and the phrase "How marvelous that it was the first thing you became acquainted with in Moscow" reads as "How marvelous that it was the

first thing [the cycle of lectures] you became acquainted with in Moscow"⁶ . In this case, the event falls into a natural chronological sequence.

But back to 1918. Steiner's book "How to attain the knowledge of the higher worlds" was read and respectfully put on the shelf.

The quest continued. Interest in yoga led Chekhov to a thorough acquaintance with theosophy, whose "excessive orientalism" was disconcerting: "<...> it still seemed to me that the importance of Christ, the Mystery of Golgotha is underestimated by theosophy. Was India the last and highest stage in the spiritual development of mankind? Was Christ one of the Teachers, like Buddha, Zarathustra, Hermes, and no more? I began to look for answers to many questions that interested me in connection with Christianity"⁷ . The artist also tried himself in "other mystical movements"⁸ , but everywhere he was repulsed by "mystical fog".

Then he returned to anthroposophy, and now he could not stop: "I read a number of books by R. Steiner, and a careful reading of them gave me the answer to the questions that were troubling me at the time"⁹ . Here he found a clarity that captivated him, an appeal to the ability to "*think*" and not just "believe"¹⁰ .

At least a partial chronology of this process can be established by the memoirs of S.M. Eisenstein, where, ironically describing his initiation into the Rosencreutzers, he mentions that in the fall of 1920 appeared "among the new adepts - Mikhail Chekhov and Smyshlyaev. In the cold living room, where I sleep on a chest, are conversations. Now they take on more of a theosophical slant. Rudolf Steiner is mentioned more and more often. Valya Smyshlyaev is trying to accelerate the growth of carrot seedlings by suggestion< ...> . Everyone is delusional about yoga. Mikhail Chekhov combines fanatical proselytizing with blasphemy. <...>

I'm the only sane one left. I am ready to burst from boredom, or burst from laughter. Finally, I am declared a "traveling knight" - I am given a free pass"¹¹ . And if S.M. Eisenstein eventually spread "the route of his wanderings away from the Rosenkreutzers, Steiner, Blavatsky"¹² , Chekhov's "blasphemies" testified to a serious attitude to the subject. The artist's passion was destined to grow into deep convictions that constitute his life and understanding of art. It was connected not only with the general orientation of interests in his intellectual environment, but also conditioned by personal existential circumstances.

In the spring of 1917, Chekhov wrote to K.S. Stanislavsky, explaining the reason for his sudden departure from rehearsals of *The Seagull*: "For about 2 1/2 years I suffer from neurasthenia in a rather severe form (according to the doctors), recently the case has worsened so much that, according to doctors, "the disease is progressing and under unfavorable conditions can threaten the sanity"¹³ . The departure of his wife Olga Chekhova in early December 1917, the suicide of his cousin Vladimir (December 13) exacerbated the serious condition and brought the artist to severe depression and suicidal thoughts. However, there is little that medicine can explain in Chekhov's leaving the stage. His departure is akin to Leo Tolstoy's departure from Yasnaya Polyana. It was already impossible to return to the theater. To the theater was to come. Before the artist with all the acuteness of the question of "the way".

In January - February 1918, he opens a private acting studio. It was assumed that the classes will be paid, but, according to the testimony of M.O. Knebel, "none of us, he never once took money". Its purpose was found in another: "From the first lessons studio became for him the main business of life. Then he said that he recovered only thanks to his work with us"¹⁴ . At first, the classes were held in his apartment - Gazetny pereulok, d. 3, square 5. Then the studio moved to the apartment of

emigrated Baron V.P. Briskorn (Nikitsky Boulevard, 6). Not only classes but also anthroposophical meetings took place in the "round room".

Mikhail Chekhov cannot limit himself to reading books and conversations with the "interested". He is looking for an "initiate" capable of becoming a mentor in spiritual science. "One day M.S. Stolyarov, one of the active members of the Russian Anthroposophical Society (RAO), came to visit the studio students. In a subsequent conversation about Anthroposophy, he gave clear and precise answers to many questions that worried those present"¹⁵

On October 15, 1921, the artist met Andrei Bely during a meeting of the Free Philosophical Association. Some time later he writes him a letter in which he asks for a date: "Dear Boris Nikolayevich, I am currently very interested in Dr. Steiner and in this connection I have a number of questions to which I would very much like to receive an answer from you personally. For God's sake, forgive my disturbance and allow me to come"¹⁶. Thus, Chekhov already knows about Steiner, considers White an authoritative expert in such an esoteric discipline as anthroposophy, and is looking for a "Teacher" in him. But if the desired meeting took place at that time, it was filled in later. After all, on October 20, 1921, Andrei Bely leaves for Germany, where he was to have new meetings with Steiner. In Russia, the writer will return only two years later - in the fall of 1923.

On June 4, 1922, the artist Margarita Sabashnikova, first wife of the poet Maximilian Voloshin and niece of the book publishers Sabashnikovs, began painting a portrait of Mikhail Chekhov in the studio "round room". The first session took place in the presence of V.N. Tatarinov. In her diary, the artist conveyed the conversation that took place:

" - You are going to play (?)

- Yes. - Only to Riga? - I hope to go to Germany to see Sh[tainer].
Do you know about him?

- Not only do I know about him, but I've been his pupil for 17 years.

Delight of both and a number of questions about the path and personality. On meditation, on the difference between the path of Ser(athim) [Sarovsky] and Drs. <...>

- Why do I have to be an actor? I want to follow Christ.

- Christ has become incarnate. He came into the world. We must go into the world, not out of the world.

- But our theater?

- We have to give the best, possible, and who knows, maybe people will be found, we will have our theater< ...> "17

After the next session (June 6) Chekhov and Tatarinov go to Voloshina to watch Steiner's portrait: "...He said of Dr.'s face that it is the only human (ee) face in the full sense; how kind he is! But how (a) austerity in this love; every feature says differently and in this face at once what in others is consistent in time. <...>

Asked about the Gospel and Christ, about the pri(ish) ef(ir). Dozens of different people had to say what I told him, but from the way he listened, I realized for the first time *what* I was talking about. He, like dry ground drinks rain, drank those words. When they left at twelve o'clock, I came into the kitchen to my hosts so shaken that I could not speak of anything.

I was told of the extreme viciousness of this man. There is incredible suffering in his face. I fear for him.

The portrait of him torments me. < ...> "18

According to Chekhov's brief remark in *The Actor's Way*: "By the time of the overseas trip of the theater my artistic ideals had already been

formed with sufficient clarity"¹⁹ , i.e. not without the participation of anthroposophist M. Sabashnikova, a path was found that allowed both "to be an actor" and "to follow Christ", to reconcile theater and anthroposophy. On July 15, 1922, the First Studio arrived on tour in Germany, where it remained until August 15 (Berlin, Wiesbaden). This time, however, it was not destined to meet Steiner. "The Doctor", according to the chronicle of his lectures²⁰ , was absent in Berlin. Mikhail Chekhov had to make do with little. He met M. Sabashnikova, who had emigrated from Russia in August, and visited the Berlin council of the Anthroposophical Society (Mozzstrasse 17), where he bought a photograph of Steiner. On July 30, 1922, he wrote a letter to A.I. Cheban about his upcoming work on Hamlet, from which it is clear that anthroposophical preoccupations had already invaded the direct theatrical work .²¹

In the summer of 1923, Mikhail Chekhov was again in Germany for medical treatment. The exact factology of his travels and meetings, which could clarify much, is unfortunately missing. In June and July Steiner read a series of lectures in Stuttgart. It is possible that the artist listened to the lectures, but it is unlikely that he met Steiner in person. M. Sabashnikova could not have passed by this event in her memoirs.

The exact date of Chekhov's entry into the Anthroposophical Society is unknown. The artist himself recalled this moment cursorily, in connection not even with himself, but with "Professor T." (T. G. Trapeznikov), head of the Moscow Lomonosov group: "Many years ago while still in Russia, he accepted me as a member of the Anthroposophical Society"²² . This may have happened before the fall of 1922, the time of the closing of the Society in Russia.

In the fall (October 26) of 1923, Andrei Bely returns to Moscow from Germany. The period of anthroposophy's legal existence was over, and anthroposophical activity was taking on hidden and indirect forms.

Already in mid-December 1923, Andrei Bely receives a proposal from the Moscow Art Theater Second to rework the novel "Petersburg" into a drama. But the concrete theatrical plot became only an occasion for a more in-depth communication, which Andrei Bely called "work". In a letter to R.V. Ivanov-Razumnik on March 8, 1925, he wrote: "and not seeing "Hamlet", I have already in my heart said to that work "yes", especially having got together last year with "Mih[ail] Alex[androvich] Chekhov on the basis of "our common non-theatrical work with him; having seen in him a man deeply rebellious, "our" (I could say "Wolfilian", I could say a[ntroposophic]) <...>"²³ .

May 3-4, 1924 Andrei Bely reads the play "Petersburg" to the troupe of the First Studio. At this time, according to M.O. Knebel, "around Chekhov and White emerged a circle of young enthusiasts. And in parallel with the rehearsals of "Petersburg" in the apartment of K.N. Vasilieva (the future wife of White) we were engaged in rhythm, movement and word, studied poetics, even the theory of literature. <...> In addition, Chekhov and Bely taught us classes in the study of the so-called "eurythmy"²⁴ .

Meetings with Andrei Bely, who was writing the play Petersburg for the First Studio, became frequent and took place under the sign of anthroposophy: "At first I talked a lot, but not about the production, but about other things: plans, karma, the threshold, etc., and then others transplanted this into the idea of the production. All the time there is some truly collective communication between the author, the directors and the protagonists"²⁵ .

In Arnhem (Holland) Chekhov listens to Steiner's lectures July 24, 1924 he and V.N. Tatarinov meet with R. Steiner²⁶

Z.M. Mazel, who knew M.A. Chekhov closely since 1917, testified: "He did not tell me in detail about this meeting, but I remember one phrase of his exactly: 'After meeting Steiner I realized all the greatness of man's spiritual life'"²⁷ . And further Mazel continued: "We were both members of the Anthroposophical Society and members of the Masonic Order Lodge"²⁸ . We will not touch here on other aspects of the mystical quest of Mikhail Chekhov and to clarify about the "Masonic order lodge", as well as to try to verify the words of the Templar and Rosencreutzer M.I. Sizov that Mikhail Chekhov "had one of the senior degrees of the Order of Templars. The testimony of those under investigation in the NKVD, which in this regard refers to A.L. Nikitin - a thing very shaky and requires comparison with other sources. And they have not been found yet. And our task is more private.

November 17, 1924 was a public dress rehearsal of "Hamlet". Andrei Bely, who saw the play at least five times, interpreted it primarily within the framework of the theme that united him with Mikhail Chekhov, and considered the role as a kind of "initiation": "Chekhov - Hamlet in this section is seen to me as 'adopted by the Father': the external sign of the 'father' is one Chekhov's dear man (and you guess - who...²⁹); and the internal meaning of the sign: the descent of 'Manas', 'Reason' over the rebellions of our time"³⁰ . "Behind all the images of "Hamlet", the esoteric gesture of his soul is clear to me: to return to Dr. [Steiner - *V.I.*] what he received from him < ...> "³¹

Then White offers a formula for the spiritual and theatrical quest of the artist: "< ...> in Chekhov's case, I see confirmations of the law of dislocation, which operates more and more strongly: the man fled from "theater" to "anthroposophy"; almost abandoned his favorite business and

dived headlong into everything else; and gave "theater": gave Moscow not a performance, but for many - the "consolation of the season". The gesture of smashing the "theater" in his soul turned out to be a "theatrical trend"³² .

Most likely in Germany Chekhov gets into the hands of the edition of R. Steiner's lectures on dramatic art, which came out that spring. His impression of them is tremendous. He finds exactly what "vaguely long ago carried in his soul. At the same time, Chekhov apparently had reason to fear that the book would be impossible to bring into Russia, and he decides to communicate its contents in letters, carefully outlining one lecture after another. Moreover, even in letters he has to be careful. He resorts to innuendo, circumlocution. Confident that the addressee will understand him halfheartedly, Chekhov uses various kinds of abbreviations, the figure of default, the technique of deliberately crossing out "non-materialistic" words of the text, which the friendly eye of a like-minded person will have to restore.

We can confidently assert that by July 15, 1926, when the first letter was written, M.A. Chekhov was not a newcomer to anthroposophy at all. But, perhaps, it was the first time he studied R. Steiner's text devoted directly to theater art .³³

¹ Chekhov M.A. Literary Heritage: In 2 vol./ Compiled by I.I. Abroskina, M.S. Ivanova, N.A. Krymova. M., 1995. T. 1. C. 154.

² Ibid. C. 525.

³ See: Chekhov Mikhail. T. 1. C. 152.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Steiner R. On Russia. From lectures of different years. St. Petersburg. 1997. 334.

⁶ A copy of the German edition received at the last moment confirms our assumption: "Der Apokalypse-Cyclus, den ich mein, ist der Ihnen schon bekannte. Wie wunderbar, daß Sie ihn gerade als den ersten in Moskau kennen gelesnt haben!" (Michael Bauer. Gesammelte Werke. Bd.5: Stuttgart 1997, S.206).

- ⁷ Chekhov M.A. T.1. P.154.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Ibid. C. 156.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Eisenstein S.M. Memoirs. M., 1997. C. 64.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Chekhov M.A. T.1. P. 282
- ¹⁴ Knebel M.O. The whole life. M., 1967. C. 59.
- ¹⁵ Novikov L.A. M.K. Baranovich: Biographical sketch. - In Book: Steiner R. Blood Etherization. M., 1994. C. 26.
- ¹⁶ Chekhov M.A. T. 1. C. 292.
- ¹⁷ Voloshina Margarita (Sabashnikova M.V.). The Green Snake: The Story of One Life. M., 1993. C. 402.
- ¹⁸ Ibid. C. 404.
- ¹⁹ Chekhov M.A. Vol. 1. C. 100.
- ²⁰ H. Schmidt. Das Vortragswerk Rudolf Steiners. 2. Aufl. Dornach 1978.
- ²¹ See: Chekhov M.A.. T. 1. C. 300/
- ²² Ibid. C. 207.
- ²³ "And there is something wrong with time...": A. Belogo's Letter to R.V. Ivanov-Razumnik. March 8, 1925. Publication prepared by S. Shumikhin // Unknown Russia of the twentieth century. Book Two. M., 1992. C. 152.
- ²⁴ Chekhov M.A. Vol. 1. C. 18.
- ²⁵ "And there is something wrong with time...". C. 165.
- ²⁶ See: Chronicle of the life and work of M.A. Chekhov, compiled by M.S. Ivanova. In the book: Chekhov M.A. Vol. 2. P. 487.
- ²⁷ Cited in Nikitin A.L. Mystics, Rosencreutzers and Templars in Soviet Russia. M., 1998. C. 173.
- ²⁸ Ibid. C. 174.
- ²⁹ That is Steiner (publisher's note).
- ³⁰ "And there is something wrong with time...". C. 156.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. C. 163.

³³ Rudolf Steiner's lectures on the dramatic art as presented by Mikhail Chekhov. Letters of the actor to V.A. Gromov (1926) / Introductory text by V.V. Ivanov; edited by S.V. Kazachkov and T.L. Strizhakkov. Ivanov; publ. S.V. Kazachkov and T.L. Strizhak; comment. S.V. Kazachkov, T.L. Strizhak and V.G. Astakhova // Mnemozina. Documents and facts from the history of Russian theater of the XX century. Vol. 2 / Ed.-comp. V.V. Ivanov. MOSCOW: URSS, 2000. C. 85-142.

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