

On an Unhappy Marriage, Henry James, and Atoms:
Vladimir Nabokov Reading (on) Anton Chekhov

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Nabokov's lecture on Anton Chekhov stands out for its numerous citations from Korney Chukovsky's 1947 article 'Friend Chekhov.' At the same time, however, the lecture contains many more references to other critics, as well – some of them explicit, though not necessarily clear, others more concealed. In an attempt to trace the sources Nabokov used when drafting his Chekhov lecture, the article offers a concrete view of Nabokov's critical laboratory. Additionally, the article sheds light on his relation to other critics and critical movements, more specifically with respect to the competing 'tendencies' at work in the canonization of Chekhov's oeuvre during the interwar period: Russian émigré, Soviet, and Anglo-American.

Nabokov and 'other readers'

In his *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Vladimir Nabokov emerges not only as a reader of literature as such – and, by extension, as a teacher of literature – but also as a reader of critical writings on literature. Nabokov frequently refers to other 'readers' in the broadest sense of the word, i.e. to critics (writers, literary critics, and scholars) as well as to the common reader who, unlike the former, does not take pen in hand. Sometimes Nabokov names, cites, or refers to specific 'readers' who commented on the writer whose work is central to the lecture in question. More often, however, Nabokov refers to reactions and opinions of 'readers' without specifying whom they exactly belong to. He lumps individual 'readers' together, giving them collective names such as 'Russian readers and critics,' 'socially-minded Russian critics,' or 'Freudian-minded explorers.' More importantly, the different opinions of other 'readers' which Nabokov includes in his lectures are meaningful elements in the structure of his argumentation. They may serve as a source of new information, as support for the main argument, as a counterpoint, or just as a means to make his argument more tangible for his students, who supposedly do not know all that much about Russian literature, let alone about Russian literary criticism.

More than once scholars dealing with Nabokov's lectures on European literature and his book on Pushkin have touched upon Nabokov's sources – especially the explicit ones, i.e. those

that are not rendered anonymous or named as a collective.¹ The Russian lectures, however, have largely remained underexposed in this respect, with the exception of some notable cases. In his 1981 edition of Nabokov's Russian lectures, Fredson Bowers mentions some of the more obvious sources that Nabokov made use of, such as Korney Chukovsky's (transliterated as Kornei Chukovski) article on Chekhov, 'Friend Chekhov,' which came out in 1947 in *The Atlantic Monthly*² or S. Stephenson Smith and Andrei Isotoff's 'The Abnormal From Within: Dostoyevsky.'³ Another source is the famous historian of literature Dmitry Mirsky. Thus Hugh McLean shows that Nabokov's generalizing statement 'I have heard intelligent people maintain that the utterly false and sentimental story "Twenty-six Men and a Girl" is a masterpiece' in the lecture on Gorky is actually directed against Mirsky.⁴ And as Shoshana Knapp argues, in his lecture on Dostoyevsky Nabokov quotes Mirsky in his analysis of *The Double*, while Mikhail Efimov points out that Nabokov uses Mirsky in his lecture on Turgenev.⁵

Still, the contemporary reader of Nabokov's lectures may wonder where exactly (s)he can find Andrey Bely's attack on Freudianism, such as it is mentioned by Nabokov in his lecture on Gogol, or what the source is for Ivan Bunin's alleged disapproval of Dostoyevsky's religious ideas.⁶ The same reader might also like to identify the 'radical critics' in the lecture on Turgenev or the 'Russian critics' who compared Chekhov's style to Gogol, Flaubert, and Henry James.⁷ These 'factual' questions definitely warrant the prospect of an annotated version of the lectures, which could give us an idea of the specific critical writings and scholarly studies that Nabokov was acquainted with. Additionally, a closer look at Nabokov's sources may also shed some light on the

¹ See, for example: John Burt Foster, Jr., 'Nabokov and Kafka,' in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), 447; Joseph Frank, 'Lectures on Literature,' in *The Garland Companion*, 245, 251, 253, 254; Julian Moynahan, 'Nabokov and Joyce,' in *The Garland Companion*, 440; Gerald S. Smith, 'Notes on Prosody,' in *The Garland Companion*, 562; Mikhail Efimov, 'Nabokov and Prince D.S. Mirsky,' in *The Goalkeeper. The Nabokov Almanac*, ed. Yuri Leving (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010), 225-28.

² Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed., with an introd. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 246. Kornei Chukovski, 'Friend Chekhov,' *The Atlantic Monthly* 140 (1947): 84-90. Chukovsky's article is a shorter version of his book that came out two years earlier: *Chekhov the Man* (London: Hutchinson, 1945). Both the book and the article were translated by Pauline Rose. Nabokov's quotes are closer to the text of the article.

³ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 107.

⁴ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 305; D.S. Mirsky, *Contemporary Russian Literature 1881-1925* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), 272; Hugh McLean, 'Lectures on Russian Literature,' in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), 272.

⁵ Shoshana Knapp, 'Nabokov and Mirsky,' *The Nabokovian* 13 (1984): 35-36; Efimov, 'Nabokov and Prince D.S. Mirsky,' 226-27.

⁶ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 27 and 104, respectively.

⁷ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 66-69 and 252, respectively.

writer's own methods and preferences.⁸ And establishing which sources Nabokov did *not* use or even did *not want to use* is just as revealing and important in this respect. In the case of Dostoyevsky, for example, Hugh McLean shows that Nabokov's dislike of Dostoyevsky did not only colour his lecture on the author of *Crime and Punishment*, but also prevented him from including new findings on Dostoyevsky.⁹ Other, related questions may arise. How, for instance, did Nabokov's lectures come into being? The question deserves all the more attention if one takes into account that Nabokov first conceived at least some of the lectures in Paris in 1940-1941¹⁰ and later reworked and elaborated them while teaching at Wellesley College (1941-1948), Stanford University (1941-1942), and Cornell University (1948-1958).¹¹ The assumed successive use of Russian émigré, European, Soviet, and American sources – all with their own specificities – may have left tell-tale marks in the lectures. Also, one may wonder how original Nabokov's lectures really are. Do they testify to an independent, idiosyncratic opinion or did Nabokov pick up certain views from other critics in the course of his long career, absorbing them or even turning them into his own? Of course, my aim in pursuing these questions is not to find all of Nabokov's sources or to point out where Nabokov was or was not faithful to the materials he consulted, but to gain new insights into Nabokov's critical laboratory.

Nabokov on Chekhov: Some general thoughts

An interesting case in point to begin to explore these questions is the lecture on Anton Chekhov. This lecture seems less coherent and balanced than the other Russian lectures (except for the lecture on Gorky, which is very short and superficial and deals not only with Gorky's life and a few of his works, but also with the Moscow Art Theatre).¹² More than in the other lectures on Russian literature (and definitely more than in the lectures on European literature), a lot of attention is paid

⁸ Less important is the question how Nabokov treated his sources – with care or not? As his lectures were not meant to be published and their primary aim was mainly pedagogical (except in the case of Gogol), it is very likely that Nabokov did not treat his sources in a very strict way. Cf. also Fredson Bowers, introduction to *Lectures on Russian Literature*, by Vladimir Nabokov, ed., with an introd. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), x-xii; McLean, 'Lectures on Russian Literature,' 273.

⁹ McLean, 'Lectures on Russian Literature,' 267.

¹⁰ Nabokov prepared about 2,000 pages of lectures in 1940-1941, but almost nothing from these notes is left: see Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov. The Russian Years* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), 521.

¹¹ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov. The American Years* (London: Vintage, 1993 [1992]), 22-23, 109.

¹² Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 301-03.

to the author's life. Numerous, often quite long quotations are taken from one article in particular on Chekhov's life and oeuvre, Chukovsky's aforementioned 'Friend Chekhov.'¹³ The lecture also contains a large number of references, which taken together are quite varied in scope. Nabokov mentions critical opinions on the writer's style, on his 'ineffectual,' 'weak' characters, on his 'apoliticalness,' on his refusal to include moral judgments or facts and figures that 'matter' to a socially inspired reader, on the lack of conflict in the plays and stories, on the crossed opposition between Arkadina, Nina, Treplev, and Trigorin, and on the negative reactions to Chekhov's journey to Sakhalin Island.¹⁴

The references in the other lectures are not only less frequent¹⁵ but also less varied. In the lecture on Turgenev, for example, Nabokov repeatedly stresses the anti-radical elements which radical critics had observed in Turgenev's oeuvre,¹⁶ but nothing more. In his discussion of Dostoyevsky, Nabokov mainly cites critics to illustrate their (and his own!) disdain of the novelist's style, his religious bias, and his unrealistic characters.¹⁷ The same argument can be made for the lectures on Tolstoy and Gorky.¹⁸

Why, then, does the lecture on Chekhov stand out in this respect? Nabokov, as he explicitly stated, found it difficult to say why exactly he liked Chekhov so much. Not being able to rationalize his preference for Chekhov in the way that he did for Tolstoy,¹⁹ he apparently had to rely on the writings of other critics, more than in the other lectures. A more probable reason for the broad spectrum of references and the long quotations in this specific lecture consists in a number of essential changes Russian Chekhov criticism went through during the first half of Nabokov's

¹³ Something similar can be seen in the other lecture on a 'modern' Russian writer, Gorky, where longer quotations are taken from Alexander Roskin's biography: Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 297, 300, 301; Alexander Roskin, *From the Banks of the Volga* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946).

¹⁴ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 252, 253, 254, 259 & 283, 256, 282, 246. The latter reference derives from Chukovsky's article. Chukovsky paraphrases what many others – contemporaries of Chekhov and critics who wrote about him later – thought about Chekhov's trip (the editor of *Novoe vremya* Aleksey S. Suvorin, the playwright Ignaty N. Potapenko, the critic Mikhail P. Nevedomsky, the theatre expert Sergey D. Balukhaty, etc.).

¹⁵ This obviously does not apply to the lecture on Gogol, which was meant for publication and evidently is much more elaborate and polished than the other lectures.

¹⁶ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 66-69.

¹⁷ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 104, 115, 126.

¹⁸ More concretely, in his lecture on Tolstoy, Nabokov does not refer to any *other* critics (except for one 'ex negativo' reference that stresses his own perceptiveness. Tolstoy's special treatment of time 'has curiously never been noticed by critics,' he writes (Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 141). The lecture also contains a few remarks about what readers in general thought of Tolstoy-the-realist and Tolstoy-the-preacher (*Lectures on Russian Literature*, 140-42). In his discussion of Gorky, Nabokov quotes – apart from Roskin's book – Boudain de Courtenay's qualification of Gorky's style as 'lurid and cheap' in a deleted passage and twice refers to readers' reactions, considering Gorky's work both 'a masterpiece' and 'exotic' (*Lectures on Russian Literature*, 304 and 305-06, respectively).

¹⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 286.

literary career, eventually leading to a true paradigm shift in the 1940s. Contrary to what one might expect today, Chekhov still had to acquire the definitive status of a classic writer at the time and in fact Russian critics often did not think very highly of him.²⁰ It is safe to assume that during his time in Berlin and Paris Nabokov had read much of the debate *pro* and *contra* one of his favorite writers²¹ whom he also called ‘his predecessor’ in a 1956 letter to Edmund Wilson.²² In this respect one could also refer to Nabokov’s statement that ‘[i]t was quite a game among Russians to divide their acquaintances into those who liked Chekhov and those who did not. Those who did not were not the right sort.’²³

After Chekhov’s death in 1904 and until the beginning of World War I, a great amount of publications on Chekhov’s life and work came out. However, there was no consensus yet on Chekhov’s place in the literary canon.²⁴ After 1917, Chekhov scholarship fell into two major camps – émigré and Soviet criticism. In the Russian émigré literary criticism of the interwar period, at a time when Nabokov actively participated in the literary life of the Russian emigration, Chekhov’s status was still under discussion among both conservative and progressive critics. In the 1920s, critics like Vladislav Khodasevich, Nikolay Otsup, and Georgy Adamovich found Chekhov uninteresting, too much of a gloomy writer focused on the problems of the intelligentsia, too lyrical

²⁰ Simon Karlinsky, ‘Russian Anti-Chekhovians,’ *Russian literature* 15/2 (1984): 183-202; Nikolay G. Melnikov, ‘Chekhoviana russkogo zarubezhya,’ in *Russkoye zarubezhye o Chekhove. Kritika, literaturovedeniye, vospominaniya. Antologiya*, ed. id. (Moskva: Dom Russkogo Zarubezhya im. A. Solzhenitsyna, 2010), 3.

²¹ Nabokov had read Chekhov between the ages of 10 and 15: see Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 42-44, and Boyd, *Russian Years*, 91-93. He considered him one of the best Russian prose writers, following directly after the two giants Gogol and Tolstoy (*Lectures on Russian Literature*, 137).

²² Vladimir Nabokov, *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters. Correspondence between Vladimir Nabokov and Edmund Wilson, 1940-1971*, ed., annot. and with an introd. essay Simon Karlinsky (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), 297. On Nabokov’s admiration for Chekhov’s oeuvre and the affinities between the works of Chekhov and Nabokov, see Simon Karlinsky, ‘Nabokov and Chekhov,’ in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), 389-397.

²³ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 254. Of course, the 19th-century writers in Nabokov’s *Russian lectures* were also discussed in the émigré and Soviet press. However, their status had been established already in the nineteenth century. Some serious scholarship had been done already, and opinions on them had crystallized far more than those on Chekhov. Consider, for instance, the fact that Nabokov as a student once got a bad mark for not including any of the then almost obligatory social comments in an essay on Gogol’s *Dead Souls* (Boyd, *Russian Years*, 128-29; Donald Fanger, ‘Nabokov and Gogol,’ in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), 422). As with Chekhov, opinions on Gorky had not crystallized yet in the first half of the twentieth century and the scholarly study of his oeuvre had only just begun. In Soviet Russia, he was already considered a classic, but not among most Russian émigrés. This may also explain why Nabokov quotes so extensively from Roskin’s biography.

²⁴ Igor N. Sukhikh, ‘Skazavshiye “E!” Sovremenniki chitaiut Chekhova,’ in *A. P. Chekhov: Pro et contra. Tvorchestvo A. P. Chekhova v russkoy mysli kontsa XIX – nachala XX veka (1887-1914)*, ed. id. (Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel’stvo Russkogo khristianskogo gumanitarnogo instituta, 2002), 43-44; Igor N. Sukhikh, ‘Skazavshiye “O!” Potomki chitaiut Chekhova,’ in *A. P. Chekhov: Pro et contra, vol. 2. Tvorchestvo A. P. Chekhova v russkoy mysli XX veka (1914-1960)*, ed. id. (Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel’stvo Russkoy khristianskoy gumanitarnoy akademii, 2010), 8.

for the contemporary reader who was living in exile and going through an existential crisis. Gradually, however, especially towards the 1930s, Chekhov gained the appreciation of critics like Mark Slonim and Boris Zaytsev, among many others.²⁵ At the other side of the ideological border, in Soviet Russia, Chekhov was first seen in a negative light, as a remnant of the past, at least until the second half of the 1920s. But then, the attitude towards him began to change, as can be seen in writings by Anatoly Lunacharsky and Yury Sobolev: Chekhov was more and more being read as a writer intent on unmasking the miseries of tsarist Russia. In the 1930s, a more balanced (and scholarly) look on Chekhov began to develop in Soviet Russia, but in the 1940s the late-1920s image of Chekhov became dominant once again,²⁶ under the influence of the leading Soviet critic Vladimir Yermilov.²⁷ While Soviet critics very likely did not have access to most émigré writings, émigré critics were well aware of the critical studies that were published in Soviet Russia, even though they considered them to be ideologically distorted.²⁸

Since Nabokov also had access to non-Russian (mainly Anglo-American) sources, it is important to note here that Anglo-American writings, with the exception of the earliest studies of Chekhov's oeuvre,²⁹ mainly followed the Soviet tradition (as well as the pre-Soviet tradition, of course) and largely ignored the émigré writings on this matter. (In general, Anglo-American scholarship tended to ignore the Russian émigré community and their works until the 1960s.³⁰) Till

²⁵ Melnikov, 'Chekhoviana,' 4-6; Sukhikh, 'Skazavshie "O!,"' 18-19. See also Mirsky saying that nobody reads Chekhov (*Contemporary Russian Literature*, 96) or Aleksandr Kizevetter stating that only in the second half of the 1920s a renewed interest in the 'bore' Chekhov could be seen ('Opyat' k Chekhovu,' in *Russkoye zarubezhie o Chekhove. Kritika, literaturovedeniye, vospominaniya. Antologiya*, ed. Nikolay G. Melnikov (Moskva: Dom Russkogo Zarubezhya im. A. Solzhenitsyna, 2010), 27.

²⁶ There are also some interesting less official (and more balanced and well-founded) Soviet studies – on Chekhov's literary context (Grigory A. Byaly, 'K voprosu o russkom realizme kontsa XIX veka,' in *A. P. Chekhov: Pro et contra*, vol. 2. *Tvorchestvo A. P. Chekhova v russkoy mysli XX veka (1914-1960)*, ed. Igor N. Sukhikh (Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo Russkoy khristianskoy gumanitarnoy akademii, 2010), 712-743; the relation of Chekhov's poetics with the poetic evolution in Russian literature (Boris Eikhenbaum, 'O Chekhove,' in *A. P. Chekhov: Pro et contra*, vol. 2, 693-705); or the structure of Chekhov's dramas (Aleksandr P. Skaftymov, 'O yedinstve formy i sodержaniya v "Vishnevom sade" Chekhova' and 'K voprosu o principakh p'y'es A.P. Chekhova,' in *A. P. Chekhov: Pro et contra*, vol. 2, 744-782 and 783-813).

²⁷ Sukhikh, 'Skazavshiye "O!,"' 10-19, 20-28, 33-35; see also Thomas Eekman, 'Introduction,' in *Critical Essays on Anton Chekhov*, ed. id. (Boston, Mass.: G. K. Hall & Co, 1989), 2-3. For an overview of Chekhov's main adversaries, see Karlinsky, 'Russian Anti-Chekhovians.'

²⁸ Melnikov, 'Chekhoviana,' 7.

²⁹ William Gerhardt, *Anton Chekhov. A Critical Study* (London: Duckworth, 1923); Mirsky, *Contemporary Russian Literature*.

³⁰ Boyd, *American Years*, 16.

then, studies like Nina Toumanova's monograph,³¹ Walter Bruford's sociological study,³² or Ronald Hingley's book³³ did not incorporate the émigré view(s). Also Avrahm Yarmolinsky's *The Portable Chekhov* – which was on the reading list of Nabokov's students – mentions many different studies, but almost no émigré sources.³⁴

The large amount and great variety of explicit and anonymous references to other 'readers,' the peculiar history of Chekhov's canonization and the different and possibly conflicting – émigré, Soviet, European, Anglo-American – sources which Nabokov may have had access to, turn the lecture on Chekhov into an interesting object of study. This chapter will touch upon three aspects of the lecture that may help us see Nabokov's work as a teacher and critic more clearly: 1. Chekhov's multi-layered biography, 2. a comparison with Henry James which Nabokov ascribes to 'Russian critics,' and 3. some of Nabokov's own findings, i.e. which he does not ascribe to other 'readers,' that may be considered reminiscences of what other critics wrote before him. Of course, there is much more to be found in the lecture on Chekhov, but it is impossible to discuss all of it within the scope of this chapter.

On the genesis of Nabokov's overview: Chekhov's biography

The part of his lecture that Nabokov devotes to Chekhov's life is more extensive than the biographies in the other lectures on Russian literature. The reader is given a very positive image of Chekhov – he is a strong and patient man, doing good for the public, he is a great doctor and also a nature lover, etc. The most obvious explanation for the long passage on Chekhov's life may be the interests that Nabokov and Chekhov had in common: science and nature.

As was mentioned above, Fredson Bowers points out that Nabokov 'interpolated passages' from Chukovsky's article 'Friend Chekhov' in the lecture. Chukovsky's article speaks highly of Chekhov and builds upon pre-Soviet sources like the reminiscences by Vladimir Korolenko and

³¹ Nina Toumanova, *Anton Chekhov. The Voice of Twilight Russia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937). The author was a Russian émigré who obtained her Ph.D. in the United States.

³² Walter H. Bruford, *Chekhov and His Russia. A Sociological Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947).

³³ Ronald Hingley, *Chekhov. A Biographical and Critical Study* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1950).

³⁴ Avrahm Yarmolinsky, *The Portable Chekhov* (New York: Penguin Books, 1947). The 1950-translation of Irène Némirovsky's book (*La vie de Tchekov* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1946) is included in the list, but her work can hardly be considered as typically Russian émigré.

others that were published in the years after Chekhov's death. It also relies on Soviet scholarship, but emphasizes different things. Nabokov mentions the article's author only once, without including the title. Not only does he quote rather extensively from the article – on Chekhov's green fingers, his organizational projects, his work as a doctor, on his sociability, and his gift to recreate the Russian world of the 1880s and the 1890s, – he also paraphrases many other parts of Chukovsky's biography – about the happy life at Chekhov's estate, the reactions to his trip to Sakhalin, Chekhov's working method, and the fame and respect he enjoyed.³⁵

It is strange that Nabokov borrowed so much from Chukovsky, even if one takes into account those factors that may have made Nabokov particularly receptive to this specific article. It came out in *The Atlantic Monthly*, a journal in which Nabokov published some of his own works. Besides, Chukovsky enjoyed the reputation of an acknowledged authority in the field of literary criticism, both in Soviet Russia and abroad, a reputation dating from before the Russian Revolution and the subsequent changes in power and ideology. Also, Nabokov knew Chukovsky personally.³⁶ More important, however, is the fact that Chukovsky's article represents, in many respects, a major paradigm shift. Chukovsky was one of the first Soviet critics³⁷ to focus on the image of a positive, socially engaged, and realistic Chekhov, rather than the gloomy, pessimistic, indifferent Chekhov of 19th-century criticism and Soviet criticism until the 1920s or the Chekhov fighting poverty and misery in Tsarist Russia and criticizing bourgeois life that dominated Soviet criticism of the 1930s and 1940s. When compared to the pro-Chekhov criticism written by Russian émigrés, however, Chukovsky's text corroborates the image of Chekhov the builder, gardener, and doctor which can be seen in some early émigré writings (and most post-war émigré writings). Those writings stress the same aspects of Chekhov's personal life as Chukovsky's article (which are not so commonly or extensively elucidated in pre-war Soviet nor, consequently, in Anglo-American scholarship):

³⁵ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 246-48.

³⁶ Chukovsky was no complete stranger to Nabokov. He and Nabokov's father knew each other (Boyd, *Russian Years*, 117, 121). Nabokov himself spoke highly of Chukovsky's poetry for children (Boyd, *Russian Years*, 186), but later mocked the author on account of his bad English (Vladimir Nabokov, *Novels and Memoirs 1941-1951: The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Bend Sinister, Speak, Memory* (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 576). For a complete overview on the links between Chukovsky and Nabokov, see Anna Muza, 'Chukovski and the Nabokovs,' *The Nabokovian* 26 (1996): 30-40.

³⁷ The earliest Chekhov biographers, however, Aleksandr Izmaylov and Chekhov's youngest brother, Mikhail, were the first to focus on the positive aspects of Chekhov's life: Aleksandr A. Izmailov, *Chekhov. Biografiya* (Moskva: Zakharov, 2003 [1916]); Mikhail P. Chekhov, *Vokrug Chekhova* (Moskva: Academia, 1933). See also Eekman, 'Introduction.'

Chekhov's love of animals and horticulture and his green fingers;³⁸ Chekhov working for free for the people as a doctor or administrator;³⁹ Chekhov's work as a founder of schools, libraries, and the like in Taganrog;⁴⁰ Chekhov's report on Sakhalin Island.⁴¹

Nonetheless, Nabokov must have had other materials on Chekhov's life before Chukovsky's article came out, since he had been teaching the author since 1941. Nabokov clearly grafted fragments from Chukovsky's article onto older materials. First of all, many details in the lecture are not taken from (or only partially coincide with) Chukovsky's piece. Most of them – for instance, the fact that Chekhov's grandfather had paid the price of 3,500 roubles to buy his family's freedom, Chekhov's studies in medicine at Moscow University, or his tragic death in 1904 – cannot be attributed to any particular source, since they appear in almost any major work dealing with Chekhov's life and oeuvre written in the first half of the 20th century.⁴² The common basis for all these studies are the many publications that appeared in the first two to three decades after Chekhov's death, ranging from reminiscences by Chekhov's contemporaries and acquaintances to letters and notebooks as well as critical writings (the earliest biography of Chekhov, however, Izmaylov's *Anton Chekhov. Biografiya* (1916) appears to have been largely ignored in early Soviet studies).

³⁸ Isaak Altshuller, 'O Chekhove. Iz vospominaniy,' in *Russkoye zarubezhye o Chekhove. Kritika, literaturovedeniye, vospominaniya. Antologiya*, ed. Nikolay G. Melnikov (Moskva: Dom Russkogo Zarubezhya im. A. Solzhenitsyna, 2010 [1930]), 243; Mikhail Tsetlin, 'O Chekhove (1904-1929),' in *Russkoye zarubezhye o Chekhove*, 2010 [1930], 93. Most probably these are based on Aleksandr Kuprin's reminiscences (Aleksandr Kuprin, 'Pamyati Chekhova', in *Sbornik tovarishchestva 'Znaniye' za 1904, kn. 3* (Sankt-Peterburg: Znaniye, 1905), 3-42; Samuel S. Koteliansky, *Anton Tchekhov. Literary and Theatrical Reminiscences* (London: Routledge, 1927), 49-58). Kuprin emigrated after the revolution and fell into disfavor with Soviet authorities and Soviet Chekhov scholars. Yury Sobolev, for example, writes that 'Kuprin made Chekhov say a fluffy monologue on the topic that 'in three hundred years' time, the whole planet will be turned into a flowering garden' (Yury Sobolev, *Chekhov* (Moskva: Zhurnalno-gazetnoye obiedineniye, 1934), 304). By the way, Ronald Hingley ascribes this particular quote to Ivan Bunin (Hingley, *Chekhov*, 224), but nothing similar can be found in any of Bunin's reminiscences. The critical utterance obviously belongs to Sobolev, just like the critical remarks on some descriptions of Chekhov by Vladimir G. Korolenko and Sergey Ya. Yelptayevsky which Hingley mistakenly ascribes to Bunin.

³⁹ Altshuller, 'Eshchë o Chekhove,' *Novy Zhurnal* 4 (1943): 338.

⁴⁰ Altshuller, 'Eshchë o Chekhove,' 338ff; Tsetlin, 'O Chekhove,' 92.

⁴¹ Altshuller, 'O Chekhove,' 249.

⁴² For example, Izmaylov, *Chekhov*; Valeriya Feyder, *A. P. Chekhov. Literaturny byt i tvorchestvo po memuarnym materialam* (Leningrad: Academia, 1928); Pyotr S. Kogan, *A. P. Chekhov. Biografichesky ocherk* (Moskva, Leningrad: Moskovsky rabochy, 1929); Sobolev, *Chekhov*; Avram Derman, *Anton Pavlovich Chekhov. Kritiko-biografichesky ocherk* (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1939); next to the books by Mirsky (with quite some factual errors), Némirovsky, Toumanova, and Yarmolinsky that were mentioned before. Another émigré book on Chekhov (Mikhail Kudryumov (pseudonym for Mariya Kalash), *Serditse smyatennoye. O tvorchestve A. P. Chekhova*, came out in Paris with YMCA Press in 1934. The book offers a religious reading of Chekhov's work which, most probably, would not have attracted Nabokov (and which did not appeal to many other leading émigré critics of the time, either). Obviously, also German and French writings on Chekhov (e.g. by the critic Edmond Jaloux, whom Nabokov did not think much of (Boyd, *Russian Years*, 425) could be included.

There are also elements in Nabokov's lecture that clearly are *not* taken from Chukovsky's article and contrast with it in terms of tone, such as the suggestion that Chekhov and Olga Knipper did not have 'a happy marriage.'⁴³ Chekhov's marriage is discussed in most biographical sources, but these differ significantly in terms of emphasis and tone. In the early Soviet and Anglo-American studies⁴⁴ Chekhov and Knipper are said to have been very happy together, loving each other in a very special way, despite the fact that they could not see each other often (though all in all, not too much space is devoted to this aspect of Chekhov's life).⁴⁵ In most early émigré sources, however, one gets a more negative view of the marriage. This negative view even becomes dominant in the later émigré discourse.⁴⁶

One of the sources of this negative émigré view of Chekhov's marriage may be Isaak Altshuller. He was a doctor himself and treated Chekhov during the last 5 to 6 years of his life. Altshuller published some of his memories of Chekhov in the leading Russian émigré journals *Sovremennye zapiski* (Paris, 1930, reprinted in 2010) and *Novy Zhurnal* (New York, 1943).⁴⁷ He explicitly states that Chekhov's marriage, next to his success in the Moscow Art Theatre, did indeed influence his already precarious condition in a bad way. Despite the fact that the feelings of the newly wedded were sincere, their constant separation, Chekhov's many aggravating journeys to Moscow and the bad living conditions over there (bad weather, poor housing, and a punishing schedule), the growing animosity between Knipper and Chekhov's family, Knipper's resistance to Altshuller's treatment, and the arguments between husband and wife, etc. all caused a deterioration

⁴³ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 248.

⁴⁴ For instance, Sobolev, *Chekhov*, 258-61; Derman, *Anton Pavlovich Chekhov*, 172-75; Toumanova, *Anton Chekhov*, 194, 217. Aleksandr Izmaylov mentions the marriage in passing and does not give any details or opinion (*Chekhov*, 388, 413-17). Vladimir Yermilov does not even say a word about the marriage in his 1944 biography of Chekhov: *A. P. Chekhov* (Moskva: Sovetsky pisatel, 1944). Only later, in a newer version of his biography (1951), does he mention the marriage, in passing, and without saying how happy or unhappy the marriage was (Vladimir Yermilov, *Anton Pavlovich Chekhov 1860-1904* (Moskva: Molodaya gvardiya, 1951).

⁴⁵ Compare the following statement by Oliver Elton: 'His wife continued in her profession, and the couple had often to live apart; but the marriage brought happiness to Chekhov, to judge from the multitude of letters that have been published by his widow. They do him all honour, and show his gusty, gallant, and humorous spirit...' Oliver Elton, *Chekhov. The Tylorian Lecture 1929* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), 11.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Marc Slonim's statement on this matter: 'It was a strange marriage, since she continued her artistic career in Moscow, while Chekhov's tuberculosis confined him to the Crimea' Marc Slonim, *Modern Russian Literature: From Chekhov to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 60. Or Boris Zaytsev's very detailed, but negative view on Chekhov's spouse, in his long biography (many parts of which were published in the émigré press prior to its definitive publication in 1954): Chekhov is controlled 'like a little child' by Olga Knipper, she sends him orders from Moscow, even when he is in Moscow, she does not give up her active life, goes out, etc. Boris Zaytsev, *Literaturnaya biografiya* (New York: Izdatel'stvo im. Chekhova, 1954), 234-36. The fact that Olga is with him during his last days in Badenweiler is not even mentioned (240-41), which is strange if one considers the length of this study (261 pages).

⁴⁷ His reminiscences were published for the first time in Soviet Russia in 1960.

in Chekhov's condition.⁴⁸ In line with this view, Ivan Bunin, who was close to Chekhov and his sister, claims he foresaw the animosity between Knipper and Chekhov's sister and the detrimental influence on Chekhov's health (he even speaks of the marriage as 'suicide!', worse than Sakhalin').⁴⁹ Nabokov seems to follow the traditional émigré idea⁵⁰ that the marriage was not a happy one, emphasizing that Chekhov died far from his family and not in the presence of his wife: 'On the 2nd of July, 1904, he died far from his family and friends, amidst strangers, in a strange town.'⁵¹

It seems safe to assume that for the earlier versions of his lecture on Chekhov – most probably when he was preparing his first series of lectures in 1940-1941 – Nabokov based his biography of Chekhov on émigré sources that he had at his disposal or had read when he lived in Berlin and Paris. Later, having read Chukovsky's article in 1947, he seems to have changed certain parts of the lecture he already had, interpolating parts from Chukovsky's article. This explains the apparent conflicts in tone in the text that one can see in the fragments that cannot be related to Chukovsky's article.

⁴⁸ Isaak Altshuller, 'Eshchë o Chekhove,' 345-55; 'O Chekhove,' 252.

⁴⁹ Ivan Bunin, *O Chekhove. Nezakonchennaya rukopis* (New York: Izdatel'stvo imeni Chekhova, 1955), 71; cf. also 131. Modern Chekhov scholarship, taking into account, among other things, Altshuller's letters and reports, seems to affirm the émigré view at least partially. It no longer tends to idealize Chekhov's life and instead draws a realistic, balanced image of the facts, acknowledging that Chekhov's marriage with Olga Knipper was far from idyllic, even unhappy at times: see, for example, Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov. A Life*. (London: Harper Collins, 1997, especially pages 492ff.). See also the following passage from Rayfield's introduction: 'His many biographers have tried to build out of the evidence a consensual life of a saint – a man who in a life shortened by chronic illness pulled himself from poverty to gentility, became a doctor and tended to the oppressed, won fame as the leading prose-writer and dramatist of his time in Europe, was supported all his life by an adorning sister and, though too late, found happiness in marriage with the actress who interpreted him best' (xv).

⁵⁰ Later Anglo-American writings, like Ronald Hingley's or David Magarshack's, are much more balanced (which could be due to the fact that they, in contrast to earlier Anglo-American studies, used not only the letters to Olga Knipper, but also the letters by her and Chekhov (which were published later, in 1934 and 1936 in Moscow), stressing the happiness and some of the problems (Hingley, *Chekhov*, 224-229; David Magarshack, *Chekhov. A Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1925), 360ff.). Irène Némirovsky, too, seems to give a more balanced view on Chekhov's marriage. It is unclear which sources Némirovsky used for the whole book (mainly Soviet or émigré?), but for the part on Chekhov's relationship with Knipper she used the letters between Chekhov and Knipper (Némirovsky, *La vie de Tchekov*, 239-50). Némirovsky's book did not come out till 1946, but it must have been written in the early 1940s, before the author got deported to Nazi Germany in 1942. Nabokov's attitude to the marriage can hardly be called as balanced as Hingley's or Némirovsky's, so it seems plausible that Nabokov did not change his mind on the relationship after the publication of the letters and continued to think in the 'typical' émigré way.

⁵¹ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 249. Another reading of this fragment can be found in Leonard Michaels' review of *Lectures on Russian Literature*: 'Nabokov was aware that Chekhov's wife claimed to be present and to remember, in poignant detail, the hours preceding Chekhov's death. Presumably, Nabokov doesn't believe her, and, with magnificent courtesy, chooses never to say as much, though he does say the marriage was unhappy. // It is also possible that Nabokov wants to believe in the ultimate isolation of artistic genius [...].' Leonard Michaels, L. 'Lectures on Russian Literature by Vladimir Nabokov,' *The New York Times*, October 25, 1981: 7/1.

As Hugh McLean points out, the inclusion of the extremely positive and active image of Chekhov-the-doer⁵² does not quite match the image of Chekhov that Nabokov presents his reader in other passages of his lecture where he refers, for instance, to ‘a Russian intellectual of the Chekhovian type.’⁵³ This phrase comes after the following passage, which actually contradicts the active image of Chekhov-the-doer sketched in the long introduction:

The fundamental idea of Chekhov’s best and worst characters seems to have been that until real moral and spiritual culture, physical fitness and wealth, come to the Russian masses, the efforts of the noblest and best-meaning intellectuals who build bridges and schools while the vodka pub is still there, will come to naught. His conclusion was that pure art, pure science, pure learning, being in no direct contact with the masses, will, in the long run, attain more than the clumsy and muddled attempts of benefactors.⁵⁴

This idea of Chekhov-the-intellectual follows the discussion of Chekhov’s story ‘The New Villa,’ where Nabokov focuses on the fact that the old farmer in the story is just a mean man, and not a symbol, as he would be in the stories of ‘didactic writers’ like Gorky.⁵⁵ The first part of the discussion gives the plot of the story, but the last two sentences quoted above show what Nabokov reads into the story and into Chekhov’s position. Nabokov’s ‘social’ comment is remarkable, since he constantly fulminates against ‘social readings’ (of, for example, *Madame Bovary* or *Dead Souls*). Nevertheless, this ‘social reading’ is not quite what many of Chekhov’s critics tended to stress. Their main point, in line with the critical writings of Chekhov’s earliest foes, the *narodniki* Nikolay Mikhaylovsky and Aleksandr Skabichevsky, is that Chekhov does *not* have an opinion on how to change things, that he is *indifferent* to society. Nabokov’s ‘social reading’ is more like Dmitry Mirsky’s reading of ‘In the Ravine,’ about which he writes that it is one of the few Chekhov stories that actually contains a moral judgment.⁵⁶ At the same time, as will be shown below, Nabokov’s

⁵² It seems that Nabokov was well aware of the extremely positive character of his introduction, which may have made Chekhov look like a typical socially engaged writer – something Nabokov, avoiding focusing too much on the socio-political and historical value of the works he treated, certainly did not agree with or at least did not want to stress. To the description of all the welfare work Chekhov did, Nabokov adds the following down-to-earth statement: ‘This great kindness pervades Chekhov’s literary work, but it is not a matter of program, or of literary message with him, but simply the natural coloration of his talent.’ (Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 247)

⁵³ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 250; McLean, ‘Lectures on Russian Literature,’ 270.

⁵⁴ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 250.

⁵⁵ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 249.

⁵⁶ Mirsky, *Contemporary Russian Literature*, 92.

assessment does not differ much from the dominant view on Chekhov in the first two decades of the twentieth century (which later would be inherited by the émigré community).

Critics say...

Throughout the lecture on Chekhov, Nabokov refers to opinions of anonymous critics no fewer than nine times. Most of the references are directed against social readings of Chekhov's oeuvre. This is not at all surprising: a lecture by Nabokov would not be authentic without an attack on reading literature for 'the message.' Indeed, Nabokov praises Chekhov for things that irritated 'politically minded' critics – for not including any moral judgments or political statements,⁵⁷ for writing about 'trivial unnecessary matters instead of thoroughly examining and solving the problems of bourgeois marriage,'⁵⁸ for avoiding 'a definite line of conflict' in his plays and even for not answering how much a singer usually earns.⁵⁹ Some of these opinions can certainly be attributed to an exact source, but the majority cannot be related to just one specific critic and collectively reflect the large school of late 19th and early 20th-century socially-minded critics who all built on the critical writings of Chekhov's earliest foes, the *narodniki*.

The same goes for the idea that Chekhov's main hero is an ineffectual hero – 'the Russian intellectual, the Russian idealist,' whom Nabokov calls 'charming' and 'ineffectual': someone who does not succeed in his life and cannot make his dreams come true, no matter how many he has. Nabokov refers to 'philosophical' and 'social-minded critics' who perceive Chekhov as 'a unique exponent of a unique Russian type of character.'⁶⁰ Later on he claims that 'what really attracted the Russian reader was that in Chekhov's heroes he recognized the type of the Russian intellectual, the Russian idealist, a queer and pathetic creature that is little known abroad and cannot exist in the Russia of the Soviets.'⁶¹ This view – or more correctly, similar views, each with their own colouring – was widespread in 19th-century social-minded views of Chekhov.⁶² The fact that

⁵⁷ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 254.

⁵⁸ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 259; with reference to 'The Lady with the Little Dog.'

⁵⁹ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 283, 286; with reference to *The Seagull / The Gull*.

⁶⁰ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 253.

⁶¹ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 253.

⁶² See in this respect Karlinsky, 'Russian Anti-Chekhovians' and Olga Tabachnikova, ed., *Anton Chekhov through the Eyes of Russian Thinkers. Vasilii Rozanov, Dmitrii Merezhkovskii and Lev Shestov* (London, New York: Anthem Press, 2010). Besides the critical writings by Mikhaylovsky and Skabichevsky, see also Mikhail A. Protopopov, 'Zhertva

Nabokov actually follows this distorted image (since characters in Chekhov's oeuvre are much more diverse than here implied and many are not intellectuals at all) and the idea that is inextricably linked with it – the characters' Russianness – is not surprising: it matches the view of many pre-Soviet and émigré critics which originated in the writings of Silver Age iconic philosophers and critics such as Lev Shestov, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, and others, who all considered Chekhov a gloomy writer. Think in this respect of the title of Nina Toumanova's book *Anton Chekhov. The Voice of Twilight Russia* (1937) or the following statement by Janko Lavrin (a Slovenian-Russian émigré and an important literary critic in interwar Anglo-American academia):

[Chekhov] became haunted by the great Tedium as something inseparable from human existence. This attitude he expressed in accents entirely of his own at an age when [...] the whole of the Russian intelligentsia was plunged into a state of aimlessness and frustration. Feeling out of gear with the age, with the entire Zeitgeist, the best intellectuals of that period did not know what to do either with life or with themselves. And since Chekhov happened to be one of them, he was able to render their mood of bewilderment to perfection not only in his stories but also in his plays. His characters are 'superfluous' [...]. Their nostalgia [...] comes frequently from their dissatisfaction with the very core of life. Their state of mind is further complicated by their feeling of isolation [...].⁶³

More interesting than the social and religious-philosophical criticism that Nabokov refers to, is the criticism that focuses on specific characteristics of Chekhov's oeuvre. For example, Nabokov says the following about Chekhov's style: 'Russian critics have noticed that Chekhov's style, his choice of words and so, did not reveal any of those special artistic preoccupations that obsessed, for instance, Gogol or Flaubert or Henry James.'⁶⁴ Russian critics indeed have compared Chekhov's

bezvremeniya,' in A. P. Chekhov: *Pro et contra. Tvorchestvo A. P. Chekhova v russkoy mysli kontsa XIX – nachala XX veka (1887-1914)*, ed. (Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo Russkogo khristianskogo gumanitarnogo instituta, 2002 [1892]), 112-44; Dmitry Merezhkovsky, 'Chekhov i Gorky,' in A. P. Chekhov: *Pro et contra*, 2002 [1906], 692-721; Lev Shestov, 'Tvorchestvo iz nichego (A.P. Chekhov),' in A. P. Chekhov: *Pro et contra*, 2002 [1908], 566-599.

⁶³ Janko Lavrin, *From Pushkin to Mayakovsky. A Study in the Evolution of Literature* (London: Sylvan Press, 1948), 179. Compare also the following statements by Lavrin: 'Chekhov is the finest miniature painter of the decaying and bankrupt Russian intelligentsia [...]' (Janko Lavrin, *Studies in European Literature* (London: Constable & Company Limited, 1929), 158); 'It was Chekhov's art as a whole that gave a powerful diagnosis of contemporary Russian society, and particularly of the intelligentsia.' (Janko Lavrin, *An Introduction to the Russian Novel* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1947 [1942]), 131.) Lavrin also speaks of Chekhov's 'cult of frustration,' as opposed to the 'Anglo-Saxon cult of success' (*An Introduction to the Russian Novel*, 133; see also *Studies in European Literature*, 175).

⁶⁴ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 252.

work many times with that of Gogol or Flaubert, and sometimes even on stylistic grounds. It is striking to note, however, that Nabokov adds the name of James to those of Gogol and Flaubert. James was relatively unknown in Russia and none of his work was perceived as a classic. He was not considered to be in the same league as Gogol or Flaubert: a few short stories were translated in the 1880s and 1890s, but then nothing else until the 1970s. So it is not surprising that Chekhov's main critics in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century did not mention James at all.⁶⁵ Nabokov seems to attribute a comparison between Chekhov and James to Russian critics, but such a comparison could at best have been made by a Western or Western-oriented reader or critic like Edmund Wilson or Nina Tumanova, but when they do so it is not on stylistic grounds.⁶⁶

Only one highly original interpretative study by the now almost forgotten novelist William Gerhardt (later Gerhardt) explicitly draws the Chekhov-James comparison with respect to matters of style. Gerhardt published his study *Anton Chekhov. A Critical Study* in 1923 (reprinted in 1949; note the specific transliteration Gerhardt uses – more on that below). It was the first book-length study on Chekhov in any language other than Russian. James is mentioned a few times in different contexts (e.g., with regard to plot), but this specific passage is closest to what Nabokov writes:

[S]ubtlety can be expressed easily and directly. They [i.e. Chekhov's artistic methods, his gestures of speech, some poses and idiosyncrasies] have none of James's strings of definitions, qualifications, ramifications, curtailments, which remind one of a tailor who, fumbling with his scissors, first cuts off a slice but not enough, then cuts off too much and is obliged to add a piece – and yet, perhaps in consideration of the pains he takes, is acclaimed a subtle craftsman. It is at the garment we must look. Chekhov has managed to express subtle things simply. Henry James has succeeded in expressing simple things subtly. But it is the broth that matters, not the act of stewing it, which with James seems to take place in public. In Chekhov we see nothing of the seething process, which is in the secret

⁶⁵ That does not mean that James was completely unknown – some Russian readers and critics knew about Henry James and did read him in the original. Note that Nabokov did not really like Henry James: see Boyd, *Russian Years*, 90-91; also Nabokov, *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, 52, 53, 54, 180, 182, 184, 213, 278; Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 64.

⁶⁶ Edmund Wilson, 'Seeing Chekhov Plain,' in *Anton Chekhov*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 2003), 112; Tumanova, *Anton Chekhov*, 145.

furnace of his sensibility. And, once the broth is stewed, he serves it out to us simply and directly.⁶⁷

Gerhardi's study is also interesting beyond this specific statement as, throughout his book, he stresses a number of elements that feature in Nabokov's lecture and that seem to be lacking in the other possible sources mentioned so far. The similarities are so striking, that it seems safe to assume that Nabokov must have made use of Gerhardi's study when preparing his lectures. It could even be argued that he subsequently ascribed Gerhardi's thoughts on this matter to the anonymous, generalizing 'Russian critics,' whether by mistake or on purpose. Let us have a look at these similarities.⁶⁸

First of all, both Gerhardi and Nabokov express a similar view on the resemblances that Russian critics, Tolstoy in particular, want to see between Maupassant and Chekhov.⁶⁹ In his discussion of the fact that, except for 'The Duel,' Chekhov never wrote any long stories,⁷⁰ Gerhardi states that '[t]he comparison with Maupassant is a little naïve. One could understand Maupassant being called the French Chehov, in a mood of generous extravagance. But it was well meant; and, after all, Maupassant preceded Chehov, and both of them excelled in the short-story.'⁷¹ Nabokov stresses the same characteristic and writes: 'Chekhov has been compared to the second-rate French writer Maupassant [...]; and though this comparison is detrimental to Chekhov in the artistic sense, there is one feature common to both writers: they could not afford to be long-winded.'⁷² Nabokov adds an extra, typically Nabokovian conclusion, related to his analysis of *The Gull*, where he more than once criticizes Chekhov for certain shortcomings: 'His qualities as a playwright were merely his qualities as a writer of long short stories: the defects of his plays are the same that would have been obvious had he attempted to write full-bodied novels.'⁷³

⁶⁷ Gerhardi, *Anton Chehov*, 132.

⁶⁸ There are many more similarities between the two texts, but some of them can be found in other critics' writings too: certain biographic elements (esp. Chekhov building schools, helping the sick for free, helping with famine relief, his trip to Sakhalin) (Gerhardi, *Anton Chehov*, 68-99); Chekhov's stories are true to life and lack dénouement (15, 105-09); the tragicomic character of Chekhov's stories (24-27); Chekhov's political independence (34); the objectivity of Chekhov's stories and the fact that they do not contain any moral judgement (56-59, 167); and the character of Trigorin as an alter ego of Chekhov (64-65, 86).

⁶⁹ Gerhardi, *Anton Chehov*, 96.

⁷⁰ Gerhardi, *Anton Chehov*, 109.

⁷¹ Gerhardi, *Anton Chehov*, 96.

⁷² Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 252.

⁷³ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 252.

Second, both Gerhardt and Nabokov focus on the importance of irrelevant details in Chekhov's stories for showing the mood of his heroes.⁷⁴ Interestingly, they both refer to the same scene from 'The Lady with the Little Dog' to prove their point: when Gurov arrives in the city where his mistress lives, the narrator focuses on the grey arm cloth on the floor of Gurov's hotel room, a grey, damaged inkstand, etc. Although Nabokov's analysis is more elaborate, the similarities between Gerhardt's and Nabokov's analyses are striking. Furthermore, Nabokov's mention of the fact that Gurov does not remember the name of the Lady's little dog⁷⁵ seems to echo an observation made by Gerhardt elsewhere in his long study where he discusses 'Anna on the Neck.' Gerhardt calls attention to '[...] Chehov's uncanny way of securing the illusion of reality by such intimate retrospective details thrown in here and there, e.g. the fact that she had been introduced to him in a particular street, but could not remember his name.'⁷⁶ Equally striking is the fact that both authors relate Chekhov's love for the irrelevant detail to the literary praxis of Tolstoy and Gogol. While Nabokov drily states that '[t]he unexpected little turns and the lightness of the touches are what places Chekhov, above all Russian writers of fiction, on the level of Gogol and Tolstoy,'⁷⁷ Gerhardt actually stresses that Tolstoy and Chekhov treat trivial, seemingly irrelevant details in a similar way, i.e. very different from Gogol. Tolstoy and Chekhov describe details like the wallpaper only when it is useful to do so, to add meaning to the narrative (in case of Anna being ill in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*),⁷⁸ while Gogol does not seem to need a particular reason for including details (as with the wallpaper in Korobochka's house). Needless to say, we are reminded here of Nabokov asking his students to describe what the wallpaper in *Anna Karenina* looked like, or of the attention that he pays to the little bug 'creeping up a blade of grass' when Levin is deep in thought (part eight, chapter 12).

There are also a few smaller, but no less pertinent similarities – e.g., Gerhardt and Nabokov both single out Chekhov's ability to make his characters come alive with a few strokes⁷⁹ – but they are less striking and they also may go back to what other critics said before. Other elements that

⁷⁴ Gerhardt, *Anton Chehov*, 133-34 and Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 259-60.

⁷⁵ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 260.

⁷⁶ Gerhardt, *Anton Chehov*, 162.

⁷⁷ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 260.

⁷⁸ 'Tolstoy's and Chehov's method was that of flinging in the apt descriptive detail in a swift and unobtrusive manner. [...] This is, we somehow feel, true to life; it is significant of life. It is an apparent triviality such as signifies great literature. And it is because Tolstoy's and Chehov's works are permeated with this kind of thing that we feel the pulse of life in them. This quality Chehov has in common with Tolstoy, but specialising in it more than the older writer, Chehov's objects are even more delicately charged with emotional significance.' (Gerhardt, *Anton Chehov*, 133)

⁷⁹ Gerhardt, *Anton Chehov*, 176; Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 262.

point in the direction of Nabokov having read (and used?) Gerhardi have to do with the latter's background and life, which in many ways was similar to Nabokov's and certainly must have appealed to him. Gerhardi – a contemporary of Nabokov – was born in Saint-Petersburg in a wealthy, industrial English family in 1895. He spent his youth in Russia, spoke four languages (English, French, German and Russian, the latter with his siblings and the servants of the family; Russian was also the language of his first literary endeavours) and was well acquainted with the literature of these four cultures. He left Russia in 1913 to study in London, enlisted in the British army in 1915 and later was sent to Petrograd as an officer weeks before the February Revolution. Gerhardi lived through the turmoil of the 1917 Revolutions and could leave Russia only in 1918. Soon after, however, he was sent to Vladivostok to fight the Bolsheviks with the Allied Intervention.⁸⁰ In 1920 he enrolled at Oxford University (first aiming at a degree in English literature, but later in Russian), where he became acquainted with Katherine Mansfield, with whom he shared an interest in Chekhov and who would help him launch his literary career.⁸¹ Gerhardi would focus on the art of literature and not on social or political issues. He was referred to as 'the English Chekhov' on account of his peculiar style,⁸² a nickname that inevitably reminds us of Nabokov referring to Chekhov as his 'predecessor.'

Two other, but equally inconclusive elements that indicate that Nabokov may have used Gerhardi's study are the shared (partial) dislike of Henry James's oeuvre – Nabokov in his letters to Edmund Wilson (cf. above), Gerhardi in his analysis of Chekhov's plot⁸³ – and the shared preference for *Chehov* instead of the more usual *Chekhov* or even *Tchekhov* (much less common, but still more common than *Chehov*, are *Tchehov*, *Tchekov* or *Tchekhoff*). See, for example, Nabokov's persistent use of *Chehov* in his letters to Wilson and others.⁸⁴ Gerhardi even explains this choice in a way that reminds us of Nabokov's insistence on, for example, *Anna Karenin* instead of the more usual *Anna Karenina*:

⁸⁰ Dido Davies, *William Gerhardt: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1-90.

⁸¹ Davies, *William Gerhardt*, 93, 99-100, 113-15.

⁸² Davies, *William Gerhardt*, 121.

⁸³ Gerhardt, *Anton Chehov*, 101-05.

⁸⁴ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 257, 298; Vladimir Nabokov, *Selected Letters 1940-1977*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989) 124-27, 128, 199, 239.

Chehov's name, by the way, had much better be spelt as I spell it. This is the nearest to both the Russian spelling and pronunciation. And transliteration from the Russian, as Mr. Aylmer Maude long ago observed, is a compromise between the two – due regard always given to the simplicity, shortness, and directness of the rendering. While living abroad, Chehov himself had made use of more than one transliteration of his name. But there is certainly no need whatever for the initial 'T', so far as the English transliteration goes. However, this is not very important.⁸⁵

That it was important to him nonetheless is apparent from the following remark by Dido Davies: 'For most of his life Gerhardie adopted his own idiosyncratic spelling of "Anton Chehov" which he considered more accurately reflected the Russian pronunciation. Later in life he came to appreciate that he could never change public opinion on this point, and reverted to the most usual English spelling "Chekhov."'⁸⁶

In general, Gerhardi's life, oeuvre and view on literature, his attitude towards Chekhov, the anonymous reference to Henry James and the similarities on the level of the analysis suggest that Nabokov most probably used Gerhardi's book when preparing his own lecture. This is not to say that Nabokov's lecture is a carbon copy of Gerhardi's book. Although the similarities cannot be ignored, the differences are equally striking. While Gerhardi focuses, among other things, on the philosophical and metaphysical undertones in Chekhov's work⁸⁷ and on its psychological aspects,⁸⁸ Nabokov limits himself mainly to the artistic methods, but also allows himself some social statements about 'the Russian people' and the Russian intelligentsia (which, in turn, are opposed to Gerhardi's more balanced views on these topics).⁸⁹

Nabokov says...

⁸⁵ Gerhardi, *Anton Chehov*, 67.

⁸⁶ Davies, *William Gerhardie*, xvii.

⁸⁷ Gerhardi, *Anton Chehov*, 42-60.

⁸⁸ Gerhardi, *Anton Chehov*, 124ff.

⁸⁹ Gerhardi, *Anton Chehov*, 80, 155.

While in the minds of Nabokov's students the references to 'other critics' will, in general, have fulfilled their primary role – i.e. to make the lesson interesting and tangible, to create a contrast with Nabokov's own reading, and even to season it with additional facts – for literary scholars the inclusion of explicit and anonymous opinions are signs of Nabokov's work as a critical reader. More specifically, these references show how he constructed his lecture and which sources he used or ignored. The lecture on Chekhov is a somewhat strange mixture of 19th-century Russian criticism, Russian émigré writings (at least those that favour Chekhov) and some studies that cannot be connected to any specific school or movement, but which are highly original and innovative – i.e. Gerhardt's study and Chukovsky's article. It seems that prototypical Soviet and Anglo-American sources are largely ignored. This is in line with what one would expect, given the troubled relationship between Russian émigré and Anglo-American criticism and Nabokov's own conception of literature and attitude towards literary scholarship. In many respects, Nabokov emerges as a typical émigré critic – inextricably linked with 19th-century Russia and the Silver Age and opposed to 20th-century socialist Russia and, hence, Anglo-American criticism for its orientation on Soviet scholarship. At the same time, however, Nabokov is open to new impulses and readings as long as they are innovative or close enough to his own ideas, as with Gerhardt and Chukovsky. It is noteworthy, however, that Nabokov conceals the status and role of his two main sources. Nowhere does he tell his students that Chukovsky is a notable Soviet critic, and Gerhardt has even turned into one of the many 'Russian critics.'

It is safe to assume that more reminiscences and sources can be found in Nabokov's lecture on Chekhov. Think, for example, of the similarities with Dmitry Mirsky's survey of Russian literature (which Nabokov praised and which he used as a general reference book⁹⁰). About Chekhov's plays, for example, Mirsky writes that they 'are constructed in the same way as his stories. The differences are due to the differences of material and are imposed by the use of dialogue.'⁹¹ This reminds us of Nabokov's claim that the qualities of Chekhov's plays are inextricably linked with his experience as a writer of long short stories, while their shortcomings

⁹⁰ Nabokov, *Selected Letters*, 91, 124. Nabokov's archive holds Ivan Tkhorzhevsky's and Dmitry Mirsky's histories of Russian literature; Stephen Jan Parker, 'Library,' in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), 288. For Tkhorzhevsky's thoughts on Chekhov, see Ivan Tkhorzhevsky, 'Chekhov (1860-1904) (Iz knigi *Russkaia literatura*),' in *Russkoye zarubezhye o Chekhove. Kritika, literaturovedeniye, vospominaniya. Antologiya*, ed. Nikolay G. Melnikov (Moskva: Dom Russkogo Zarubezhya im. A. Solzhenitsyna, 2010 [1946]), 140-51.

⁹¹ Mirsky, *Contemporary Russian Literature*, 93.

can be explained as his inability to write novels.⁹² One could also refer to Némirovsky's statement that Chekhov's narrative is 'more natural,' focuses mainly on the usual, the non-exceptional, and hence differs from Maupassant.⁹³ Nabokov's first 'typical feature' seems to coincide with Némirovsky's statement – 'The story is told in the most natural way possible, not beside the after-dinner fireplace as with Turgenev or Maupassant but in the way one person relates to another the most important things in his life, slowly and yet without a break, in a slightly subdued voice.'⁹⁴ At the same time, however, it also reminds of Lavrin, who states that

Maupassant would be in his own element among elegant but too experienced bachelors after supper, when the air is permeated with the scent and smoke of cigars. We are so carried away by his clear metallic voice, by his style and his clever *pointe* that we quite overlook his cruel grin. [...] The charm of Chekhov, on the other hand, is in his simple, natural friendliness. However subdued and sad his voice may be, his lips never grin; they smile instead with a kindly, sometimes humorously disgusted, yet always understanding and forgiving smile [...].⁹⁵

And one final example: Leonid Grossman also discusses the influence of Maupassant (besides that of Flaubert) on Chekhov, which shows itself in Chekhov's naturalistic, 'colourless' style, his short stories, his animal-like characters, the focus on everyday life, the realist-symbolist bias of the stories, etc.⁹⁶ An interesting element in the article by Grossman is the following: Grossman gives an interpretation of 'In the Ravine' that corresponds with Nabokov's interpretation of the story, more particularly in the image of Aksinya as a snake-like person who poisons the people around

⁹² Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 251.

⁹³ Némirovsky, *La vie de Tchekov*, 169-76.

⁹⁴ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 262.

⁹⁵ Lavrin, *Studies in European Literature*, 168.

⁹⁶ Leonid Grossman, 'Naturalizm Chekhova,' in A. P. Chekhov: *Pro et contra*, vol. 2. *Tvorchestvo A. P. Chekhova v russkoy mysli XX veka (1914-1960)*, ed. Igor N. Sukhikh (Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo Russkoy khristianskoy gumanitarnoy akademii, 2010 [1916]), 108-12, 116-19. In his comparison Grossman names the same short stories that Nabokov refers to: 'Bel Ami' and 'Une vie' (Grossman, 'Naturalizm Chekhova,' 108-09; Nabokov, *Lectures in Russian Literature*, 252) (further in the text he also discusses 'Mont-Oriol'). It may be compelling to consider this as striking evidence of Nabokov building on Grossman. However, Chekhov himself discussed these novels in his letters and other critical writings discuss the same short stories, too (e.g., Lavrin, *Studies in European Literature*, 174).

her:⁹⁷ a similar, but less explicit view is expressed in Lavrin's comparison between Maupassant and Chekhov, where '[...] Aksinya in *The Ravine* is simply a disgusting animal.'⁹⁸

Needless to say, Nabokov's lecture is, in many ways, original and innovative, especially when we consider the early stage of development of Chekhov studies. Even when Nabokov seems to 'borrow' from other critics, he does not just copy, but elaborates on or incorporates the ideas of others in his own argumentation. Sometimes Nabokov's originality still – or seemingly – contains traces of other writings on literature in general and on Chekhov, in particular. See, for example, the highly original passage on Chekhov's 'The Lady with the Little Dog': 'The story is based on a system of waves, on the shades of this or that mood. If in Gorky's world the molecules forming it are matter, here, in Chekhov, we get a world of waves instead of particles of matter which, incidentally, is a nearer approach to the modern scientific understanding of the universe.'⁹⁹ The metaphor Nabokov uses is clearly linked to the new scientific findings of the time, like Einstein's relativity theory and other new insights in the field of physics.¹⁰⁰ But it could also be argued that Nabokov's view is more than a reference to physics alone. The term 'mood' (*nastroyeniye*) was widely used in Chekhov criticism, especially after the publication of 'A Dreary Story.' Nabokov seems to refer to this characterization, but also to the idea that Chekhov's art consists exactly in the nuance, like in an impressionist painting (cf. the reminiscences by Lev Tolstoy or the critical writing by Dmitry Merezhkovsky). Also noteworthy is the fact that, as Stephen Blackwell has pointed out, in earlier drafts Nabokov first writes 'atom,' and then changes it to 'molecules.'¹⁰¹ A possible explanation for this seemingly unmotivated (and illogical?) switch may be the criticism of Zinaida Gippius, one of Nabokov's literary foes, who allegedly – under the pseudonym of Anton Krayny – described Chekhov's perceptivity as 'atomic' (*atomistichesky*) – at least if we can believe Aleksandr Amfiteatrov, who mentions Gippius as his main source,¹⁰² but who himself continues to use this term in the years to follow.

⁹⁷ Grossman, 'Naturalizm Chekhova,' 102.

⁹⁸ Lavrin, *Studies in European Literature*, 176.

⁹⁹ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 262.

¹⁰⁰ Stephen H. Blackwell, *The Quill and the Scalpel. Nabokov's Art and the Worlds of Science* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2009), 140-41. Cf. the intriguing analysis on the link between Nabokov's art and developments in physics, 140-67.

¹⁰¹ Blackwell, *The Quill and the Scalpel*, 236.

¹⁰² Aleksandr Amfiteatrov, 'Anton Chekhov,' in *Russkoye zarubezhnye o Chekhove. Kritika, literaturovedeniye, vospominaniya. Antologiya*, ed. Nikolay G. Melnikov (Moskva: Dom Russkogo Zarubezhya im. A. Solzhenitsyna, 2010 [1931]), 104.

All in all, the lecture on Chekhov is more explicitly ‘compiled’ than the other lectures. This does not, however, diminish the fact that a closer analysis of the sources that Nabokov used for his other lectures on Russian literature begins to look quite compelling. It is highly probable that such an analysis would lead to new insights into Nabokov’s critical laboratory. One of the central topics, for example, could be where Nabokov places himself in relation to the three big scholarly traditions – émigré Russian, Soviet Russian, and Anglo-American – or any specific schools. And what about French and German scholarship? In any case, this analysis would be useful for a new edition of Nabokov’s lectures. Bearing in mind Brian Boyd’s assertion that Fredson Bowers’ edition of the lectures is not as accurate and complete as it should have been¹⁰³ and Stephen Jan Parker’s observation that the edited lectures contain only a part of the textual notations that can be found in Nabokov’s teaching texts,¹⁰⁴ one can only share Hugh McLean’s hope for a new, ‘more responsible’ and indexed edition of the lectures.¹⁰⁵ Besides an index, a new edition of the lectures definitely should include annotations, too. The present article has hopefully made a convincing case for such an enterprise.

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¹⁰³ Boyd, *American Years*, 173n.

¹⁰⁴ Parker, ‘Library,’ 287.

¹⁰⁵ McLean, ‘Lectures on Russian Literature,’ 259.

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