Appearance and Essence. Reality and Interpretation. Comments upon the end of A. P. Chekhov's play "Uncle Vanya"

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Beaucoup d'articles et d'études ont été rédigés au cours des dernières décennies sur la coexistence insaisissable entre apparence et essence, ainsi que sur la pluralité des interprétations tissées autour du message proposé par une œuvre littéraire. Trouvant un bon refuge dans l'affirmation de l'opera aperta et aussi dans la dichotomie, souvent forcée mais jamais vraiment prouvée, entre l'auteur et le narrateur d'un texte, une multitude de clés de lecture ont envahi le monde littéraire et artistique, certaines d'entre eux restant prudemment proches du texte et des intentions de l'auteur, d'autres risquant de s'éloigner de l'objet de leur investigation. Notre étude se propose d'évaluer la fin de la pièce de Anton Tchekhov « Oncle Vania » en suivant le laïque et les matrices religieuses, mais pas avant d'énumérer quelques contextes linguistiques, artistiques et théologiques qui sont ouverts à des interprétations ambivalentes.

Mots-clés: l'opera aperta, clés de lecture, contextes linguistiques, interprétations ambivalentes.

Plenty of articles and studies have been written during the last decades about the elusive coexistence between appearance and essence, as well as about the plurality of interpretations woven around the message proposed by a literary work. Finding good shelter in the *opera aperta* decree and also in the often forced but never really proven dichotomy between the author and the narrator of a text, a multitude of reading keys has invaded the literary and artistic world, some of them cautiously remaining closer to the text and to the author's intentions, others going far if not even deviating from the object of their investigation no matter how attractive and luring their dance with the word may have been. Our paper aims to evaluate the end of A. P. Chekhov's play "Uncle Vanya" by following the mundane and the religious matrices, not before enumerating a few linguistic, artistic and theological contexts which are open to ambivalent interpretations.

Linguistically speaking, among the majority of unequivocal words describing various notions there are also rarer terms with ambiguous or rather ambivalent meaning, their use in different contexts playing the essential role in giving them

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certain connotations which often prove to be opposite. For instance, the English term *luck* found in this particular form in dictionaries but seldom used as such in spoken language has the true philosophical correspondent in the word *chance* which is placed in an equidistant semantic position, as some perfectly balanced scales. It is therefore absolutely necessary for a speaker to give the term a positive or a negative connotation, i.e. *good luck* or *bad luck/ill luck*, if he wants to use it in certain phrases. The arising conclusion is that the same initial and absolute entity, idea or category may transform, depending on the context, that is on interpretation, into different if not opposite terms.

In the same way we may gloss upon the verb *tempt* and the corresponding noun *temptation* as they are used in the well-known Lord's Prayer, as well as in many other biblical contexts. Arousing even a controversy over the exactness of its translation, the verse *And do not lead us into temptation* remains obscure for most of believers to this day, if not a stumbling block that needs further explanations. The reason is no doubt the common perception of the human mind according to which God is seen kind and loving, therefore unable to lead someone into temptation, as this word has lost its original connotation, having nowadays only a negative meaning proven by a quick look up into the dictionary: "a strong desire to have or do something even though you know you should not". Nevertheless, due to misinterpretation or misunderstanding, this meaning is just a deviation from the original one still found in Romanian dictionaries under the specification *old style*, the noun originally describing "a trial, a test one was put to in order to reveal one's love, patience, faith, etc.", while the corresponding verb meant "to put someone to the test, to trial one's feelings and character". It seems the story of Job takes shape before our eyes. Actually a thorough study of the Bible, especially of *The New Testament*, but also of *The Old Testament*, mainly *The Psalms* and *The Book of Job* solve this seeming mistranslation, revealing various events when God tests His believers, the trial itself not having a negative purpose, on the contrary. Depending on the individual reaction, the "subjects" put to the test can climb up or down spiritual steps. Joking more or less, the initial test has become temptation during the centuries mainly because most of the people have failed their exams.

Quite alike the same organ recital based on Bach's works was perceived and commented by two different columnists in two opposite ways years ago: one confessed he felt elevated, lifted by the divine, celestial music; on the contrary the other had felt himself completely crushed under the granite-like weight of the musical vibration. Thus we are not very far from the iconic representations of Our Saviour in the French Middle Ages territories separated by the Loire in *langue d'oc* and *langue d'oil*. In the northern part the frescoes and the ikons showed a wrathful, vengeful, punishing Jesus of the Last Judgement, while Jesus in the southern part was kind, loving, merciful and forgiving. Going even farther we can practically contemplate the two images of the Almighty God as seen in *The Old Testament* ("gelous", "vengeful", "uncompromising") and in *The New Testament* ("pitiful" or "an ocean of love and mercy"). Yet, the true God is first of all right or just, as He is

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described in the sixth Orthodox morning prayer "everlasting light without beginning, in which there is not even a shadow of change".

Having in mind all these contexts, the conclusions and the imagery they drove us to let us cast some light on the end of Chekhov's play "Uncle Vanya" entitled "a comedy" in spite of its dramatic plot. Professor Serebryakov is an academic whose seemingly interesting ideas written in articles piously read by his former mother-in-law and published once in prestigious magazines prove now to be contradicted by his own recent ones. After the storm he aroused in the house that did not even belong to him, he leaves the estate together with his second young wife, whom Vanya, Serebryakov's former brother-in-law, had madly fallen in love. Voynitsky's last chance of earthly happiness fades away together with the gallop of the horses. Chekhov makes the pain grow each time the characters return on stage repeating the same line:

ASTROV: *They've gone. (…)**
MARINA: *They've gone. (…)*
SONYA: *They've gone. (…)*
MARIA VASILYEVNA: *They've gone. (…)*

Who has gone? The Serebryakovs, the important people, the residents of the capital. The glittering and glimmering life of the winners. Who was left behind? Astrov, the unwilling doctor buried in the country, Marina, the old nanny, Sonya, the ugly spinster, Maria Vasilyevna Voynitskaya, the impoverished widow and her son, Ivan Voynitsky, a thinker without will and self-confidence, swallowed by the petty country life. They are all losers, "failures" in the world's eyes, small, dull and unimportant people of the provinces. Then Astrov also leaves to the neighbouring estate taking with him Sonya's last chance of happiness. There is the same heart-breaking repeated line "He's gone…", uttered by Marina and Sonya. Chekhov's overwhelming silence follows. Then the same monotonous life lacking any external brightness takes back its old course as before flooding the whole stage. Voynitsky's attitude, overwhelmed with grief, is the one of a man overtaken by hardships:

VOYNITSKY *[To Sonya]: Oh, my child, I'm terribly depressed; if you only knew how miserable I am!*

Although she finds herself in the same situation, Sonya reacts completely different, as a Christian, her monologue including plenty of direct biblical references. First of all she tries to look beyond the hardships fate confronts them with, considering them trials that could be surpassed only by accepting them totally in an attitude of patient and silent surrender inspired by faith:

SONYA: *(…) we shall patiently bear the trials that fate imposes on us*

A ray of hope slowly enlightens the darkness of despair, giving Vanya the possibility to grab onto it, a narrow path to get out of the dead end, a solution in the terms St. Paul the Apostle addresed the Corinthians in his first Epistle: "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able, but will with the

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temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." (I Corinthians, chapter 10, verse 13) **

Sonya's description of the life God arranged for them on the earth includes total abandon, efforts and pains for their fellow beings, the unspectacular background existence of a secondary character, but all these should seem small and unimportant when compared with the reward awaiting for them in the next eternal life:

SONYA: *What can we do? We must live our lives. [A pause] Yes, we shall live, Uncle Vanya. We shall live through the long procession of days before us, and through the long evenings; we shall patiently bear the trials that fate imposes on us; we shall work for others without rest, both now and when we are old (…)*

The reference to the biblical story of Lazarus and the Rich man (The Gospel according to Luke, chapter 16, verses 19-31) is obvious. An Orthodox prayer for salvation ends up with the same opposition between this life and the Life beyond: "My Lord, make me know how little the earthly welfare is and how great the heavenly, how short the time of this life is and how endless the eternity." Sonya continues describing the heavenly reward:

SONYA: *(…)and when our last hour comes we shall meet it humbly, and there, beyond the grave, we shall say that we have suffered and wept, that our life was bitter, and God will have pity on us. Ah, then dear, dear Uncle, you and I shall see that bright and beautiful life; we shall rejoice and look back upon our sorrow here; a tender smile -- and -- we shall rest.*

St. Paul writes practically the same things in his Epistle to the Romans (Chapter 8, verse 18): "For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

That is the reason the repetition Chekhov uses this time is not of a discouraging word as before (*They've gone, He's gone*), but of a strengthening, fortifying one:

SONYA: *I have faith, Uncle, fervent, passionate faith.(…) I have faith; I have faith.*

Sonya's hope is thus connected with the Kingdom of Heaven which she imagines as "peaceful and tender and sweet as a caress", the reward for those who have endured everything until the end, in spite of all hardships, being the eternal rest and peace. The play ends therefore with the triple utterance of a promise:

SONYA: *(…) We shall rest. [*She embraces him*] We shall rest! [*The WATCHMAN'S rattle is heard in the garden; TELEGIN plays softly; MME. VOYNITSKAYA writes something on the margin of her pamphlet; MARINA knits her stocking*] We shall rest!*

To conclude we may assert that Chekhov lays before the public the same difficult trial, a lost and last possibility of being happy together with the person you fall in love with, and two different approaches: the common, mundane one, of a defeated man and the uncommon, faithful one, that of a firm and bold Christian's. The former attitude pushes the spirit down, the latter elevates it. Besides, the final text itself, Sonya's monologue quoted entirely before, may lead to different, even

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opposed interpretations, as it has already happened in Chekhovian exegesis and in the various stage productions over the years and we could see either the ugly young woman's resignation, dissapointed surrender, giving up hope because of Astrov's rejection, or on the contrary her true, unshaken and unalterable faith lived deeply up to *kenosis*, as Sonya fixes her eyes beyond the vails of this transient world. Once again appearance and essence. Reality and interpretation.

* All the quotations from the play *Uncle Vanya* are taken from *Plays by Anton Tchekoff*, translated from the Russian by Marian Fell, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916. Translation revised in 1998 by James Rusk and A. S. Man.

** All the quotations from the *Scripture* are taken from the Official King James Bible online (http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/)

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