

Title: Three Methods of (Mis)reading Chekhov the Cartesian Way
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This paper summarizes my analysis of numerous representative critical writings on Chekhov from the 1880s to our day, and outlines three Cartesian paradigms of reading this writer. The premise of Cartesian (René Descartes's) philosophy states that rational thinking precedes practical life. I suggest that Chekhov is better understood by means of interpreting him in the opposite, phenomenological tradition, which postulates that practical living comes before theorizing. I scrutinize literary criticism philosophically not because it is intentionally philosophical, but because criticism frequently unconsciously follows deeper intellectual premises that shape culture and literature.

The three critical Cartesian paradigms are formed of two intertwined issues. The first is poetic, narratological, and rhetorical, and consists of the agreement that Chekhov is a great narrative and verbal craftsman. The second problem is hermeneutic, and boils down to a palette of propositions as regards how to interpret Chekhov's art.

The first critical line, referring mainly to the early Chekhov, praises him as a master of narration, yet berates the lack of idea(l)s in his fictions. This combination of approval and rebuke results in denying Chekhov artistic greatness.

The second interpretive trend, inspired predominantly by the mature Chekhov, and often a reaction to the first, admires the writer's narrative mastery, and sketches an array of idea(l)s, which require a special critical perspicacity to be perceived.

The third critical tendency, which reverses the first, and is in the wake of the modernistic doctrines of art, applauds Chekhov's artistry as self-sufficient. If the first line refuses Chekhov a place among the greats due to lack of idea(l)s, the third bestows greatness upon him for this very reason.

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