

Title: The Fiddler's Tears: Exposure and Disclosure in Chekhov
Author: Emma Lieber, Columbia University

From the beginning of Chekhov's career, the critical reception of his writing has focused on its qualities of emotional detachment and objectivity, the dispassionate and almost empirically minded neutrality that seem to characterize his authorial persona and his prose. And although scholars like Robert Louis Jackson have done much to remediate Chekhov's early reputation as a mechanical collector of details, the critical view of Chekhov is in many ways still defined by Chekhov's comment to Ivan Bunin that in order to write one must be cold.

This paper seeks to refine our notions of Chekhov's chilly restraint by suggesting that it may be profitable to view the author's narrative voice as mimicking the behavior of some of his characters—self-controlled and even self-enclosed beings who may fear the consequences of relaxed emotional vigilance but who also, often, long for warmth, communal experience, and full self-revelation. This paper will examine these thematic and formal discrepancies by looking at a number of texts—including “Rothschild's Fiddle,” “The Man in a Case,” and “A Nervous Breakdown”—in which notions of self-suppression and release, of communion, communicability, and self-knowledge, and of the connections between verbal, physical, and emotive unburdening, coalesce. Ultimately such an examination may help us further understand the complex dynamics of restraint and release in both Chekhov's texts and his authorial persona.