

Title: The Brainless Virtuoso as an Existential Thinker: Contrariety in Chekhov's "Potselui"  
("The Kiss")

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This paper challenges one of the oldest critical paradigms about Chekhov, namely, that he is a brilliant verbal master who does not back any idea(s). The paradigm occurred in the 1880s among the Russian critics who condemned Chekhov for lack of social commitment, and, funnily enough, has been perpetuated, in a reversed form, by numerous later Russian and English-speaking scholars who, in the spirit of Romanticism, Modernism, and Postmodernism, have praised Chekhov for not entwining his art with social doctrines. In both cases, the stress on the rhetorical aspect of Chekhov's prose fiction – negative or positive – has neglected his existential thinking. Chekhov has been analyzed predominantly as a brainless verbal virtuoso at the expense of his intellectual depth.

A group of Chekhov's stories, among which "Potselui" occupies a central place, is based on what logic and philosophy term contrariety, i.e., the relation between two contrary statements of the same object in the same aspect and the same time. This type of thinking goes back to China's Lao Tzu, and, in the West, is developed by Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Hegel, Heidegger, Sartre, and others. Contrariety is a major feature of modernity (as stated, for instance, by phenomenology and existentialism), and Chekhov's stories belonging to this group are luminous examples of his thinking in the framework of modernity, i.e., the last two and a half centuries. My defense of Chekhov's intellectualism is an elaboration of Sartre's paradox defining human reality as a phenomenon that "is what it is not and [...] is not what it is."

I analyze contrariety on two key narrative levels of "Potselui": this of the story (the what) and that of the discourse (the how). Speaking of the story, I touch upon the uncertainty of who and why kisses the protagonist; the ambivalences of the protagonist and the secondary characters; and the motifs of ambiguity. When I discuss contrariety in the discourse, I explain the composition of "Potselui"; the discrepancies between the objective and the subjective temporality; and one of Chekhov's main poetic principles, which I term the utterance algorithm, that is, the various meanings of the same text in different contexts.