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The Psychoanalytic Tradition in the Early 20th Century and Chekhov's Legacy

Abstract: Although it is obvious that A.P. Chekhov could have no direct connection with the new method of psychoanalysis that gained great popularity in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century (unlike his nephew, the actor Mikhail Chekhov), his literary legacy nevertheless testifies to his interest in the new direction that psychology was taking at the end of the 19th century. The realization of this connection may have led the contemporary Hungarian writer Csaba Lászlóffy, who passed away a few years ago, to shape his play *Százéves torzó* [The Hundred-Year-Old Torso], which dramatizes the relationship between Jung, Sabina Spielrein and Freud, as a web of text interwoven with Chekhovian intertextuality. A prominent theme in the interpretation of this play is the relationship between Chekhov and psychology, as well as the connection between subtext (подтекст) and the subconscious (based on Maeterlinck's idea).

Keywords: Sabina Spielrein, C.G. Jung, S. Freud, A.P. Chekhov, *The Seagull*, the subconscious, subtext

This study aims to discuss an aspect of the relationship between A.P. Chekhov and the Silver Age, illuminated by the intertextual references to Chekhov in a contemporary play. The play in question is Csaba Lászlóffy's *Százéves torzó* [*The Hundred-Year-Old Torso*], published in 2011. This play was first staged in the same year (commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Jung's death in Europe) by the theater *Kiss Stúdió Színház* in Oradea, under the title *Szerelmi torzó* [*Love Torso*]. The drama focuses on the story of Sabina Spielrein and her position between Jung and Freud. It presents an important phase in her life, which played a significant part in the development of the psychoanalytic system of thought (it is likely that certain theories in Jung's or Freud's systems draw on Spielrein's theories) and in its introduction in Russia.

The first part of my train of thought will trace the connection between psychoanalysis and Konstantin Stanislavsky's theatrical oeuvre, as well as the roots of this connection, inspired by A.P. Chekhov's dramaturgy. In the second part, the focus of my attention will turn towards the text of the Lászlóffy play mentioned above, which develops the romance subplot that constitutes an important pillar in the history of psychoanalysis, interpreting the relationship

between Spielrein and Jung from the perspective of Chekhov's play *The Seagull*.

In Russia, psychoanalysis had a decisive role in shaping intellectual life from 1910 to the 1930s. Freud's ideas were welcomed fairly fast, and the Austrian psychiatrist himself wrote of a "veritable epidemic" of psychoanalysis (ETKIND 1993: 4) in the Russian context. The first Russian psychoanalysts, including Spielrein, held important positions in the medical community (after returning from Switzerland and Austria, Spielrein was appointed to chair the child psychology department of First Moscow University)[1] and maintained close ties with literary and political circles. The pool of their patients included prominent figures of the Silver Age, such as Anton Pavlovich Chekhov's nephew, the outstanding actor Mikhail Chekhov, who worked together with Konstantin Stanislavski, also very much interested in the issue of the "unconscious."

Stanislavski even uses the term подсознание, meaning the unconscious, in his book *An Actor's Work* [*Работа актёра над собой*]. This term seemed so important to him that he insisted on using it also in the 1938 edition of the book, even though he was aware that doing so might entail serious censorship consequences (ETKIND 1993: 120). Through the word подсознание, Stanislavski introduces a free expression into the field of acting that seems suitable for describing the component of stage acting that goes beyond situations dominated by reason. For him, the content *brought* into the acting role, i.e., the individual natural reactions, mechanical movements, and modes of emotional expression, is the part of acting that is built from the unconscious (подсознание), to which the superconscious (сверхсознание) adds elements derived from the understanding and knowledge of the part played. The creative process, suggests Tortsov, Stanislavski's alter ego, draws heavily on "subconscious impulses" or "emotional memories," i.e., images emerging from the subconscious; therefore, it is the actor's task to open up this subconscious creative process, the creative subconscious, on stage. (STANISLAVSKI 1989: URL) One of the fundamental questions in the book *The Actor's Work* is how an actor or actress can evoke the subconscious creation of organic nature within him or herself. The unconscious is therefore the instinctive reaction of the personality playing the part to behavioral expectations and to the system of stage play that would mimic human relationships and life situations. The subconscious can be brought into the stage play required of the actors and actresses with the help of *psychotechnique* (a portmanteau of psychological technique).

[1] Furthermore, she was also a researcher at the State Children's Home and Laboratory called "International Solidarity," whic hoperated between 1921 and 1925. At this institute, Spielrein had an outpatient practice, gave consultations, offered a special course titled "Psychoanalysis of Subconscious Thinking" and held seminars on child psychoanalysis.

Although Stanislavski does not use the terminology of depth psychology and does not build his argument around the Freudian concept of the unconscious, his description of the unconscious nevertheless suggests that the elements he uses are related to Freud's definition of the unconscious.[2] However, Stanislavski was interested in the broader concept of the unconscious, the complex structure of the psyche, and the realm *beyond* the conscious surface, not only in terms of acting, but also in terms of *the artistic material brought into the play*. Together with V.I. Nemirovich-Danchenko, they introduced the phrase подводное течение / "under(surface) current" in connection with Chekhov's plays, referring to the continuous *internal* lyrical flow *behind* the series of events on stage, the external actions and details (NEMIROVICH-DANCHENKO 1919: 10). Let us take a closer look at this concept, which describes the characteristic poetics of the most important author of the early period of the Moscow Art Theater.

The expression originates from the chapter titled "The Tragical in Daily Life" in M. Maeterlinck's 1896 collection *Le tresors des humbles* [*The Treasure of the Humble*], in which the author writes in general about the backwardness of contemporary theater, lamenting its inability to grasp the secrets and the ultimate meaning of life. He formulates a histrionic (as well as artistic) ideal that, through its means of expression, focuses on human beings' place in the universe. He outlines the ideal of drama posing existential questions, while describing the artistic text leading to self-awareness. This, in his opinion, is best represented by certain Greek plays and Henrik Ibsen's type of drama. However, when discussing the secret of existence, as in detailing the ways to

[2] It is well known that, in his seminal study *Das Ich und das Es* (*The Ego and the Id*), Freud uses the concepts of the conscious (Bewusst), the preconscious (Vorbewusst), and the unconscious (Unbewusst) to describe the structure of the individual ego, the coherent organization of the psychological processes taking place within the individual. Freud's unconscious consists of the latent but conscious (which he calls the preconscious) and the repressed unconscious (to which he limits the term unconscious). According to him, the former is associated with word images that are actually memory traces, former perceptions, and "like the traces of memory, can generally become conscious again" ("Diese Wortvorstellungen sind Erinnerungsreste, sie waren einmal Wahrnehmungen und können wie alle Erinnerungsreste wieder bewußt werden." FREUD 1923: 6 URL). In a very similar fashion to Freud's thesis, Stanislavski derives the dynamics of evoking the spiritual content hidden in the unconscious from internal images and ideas when, in the chapter "The Subconscious and the Actor's Creative State" of *An Actor's Work*, he gives an example of the operation of emotional memory in the description of the personal pain evoked by the actress Dimkova when performing the etude "the foundling". "Our subconscious is constantly present," writes Stanislavski. "We encounter it at every turn in our everyday lives. Every idea we conceive, every inner image we form, contains the subconscious to some degree. Each one of these arises from the subconscious. Every physical expression and reaction of our inner life also contains, in whole or in part, a suggestion from the subconscious." (STANISLAVSKI 1989: URL)

express “the strange and silent tragedy of the being and immensities” (MAETERLINCK 2000: 31), he lists elements that are also routinely identified as the basic characteristics of Chekhovian drama. First and foremost, I refer here to his thoughts on *motionless theater*, a form that Maeterlinck considers possible on the basis that the actual tragedy of certain Greek heroes is embodied not in action, but in motionlessness. The questioning of existence itself, appearing in the inner world through the reduction of external action, clearly brings Chekhov’s plays to mind. Yet the phenomenon called *“other” or “secondary” dialogue, which at first glance seems useless and superfluous*, also leads to Chekhov’s dramaturgy and, in the opinion of the Belgian author, it constitutes the very essence of the work. According to his definition, this “dialogue of the ‘second degree’” (MAETERLINCK 2000: 34) consists of seemingly secondary words that lie hidden *behind* words explaining the action or state of mind, i.e., words that reveal conscious motivation, and refer to the intangible. As Maeterlinck writes, secondary words are expressions of the soul’s unceasing striving for beauty and truth (MAETERLINCK 2000: 34).[3]

Nothing could prove more clearly that Chekhov’s conception of drama was indeed close to that of Maeterlinck than his admiration for the plays of the Belgian playwright. Chekhov read and admired Maeterlinck’s *The Blind* (*Les aveugles*, 1890), *Intruder* (*L'intruse*, 1890) and *Aglavaine and Sélysette* (*Aglavaine et Sélysette*, 1896) (CHEKHOV 1980: 451); and he himself urged that the Belgian author’s plays should also be staged in Russia. The question whether the recognition of a similar theatrical concept was also present in reverse seems to be more complex. The Belgian Slavicist Carolina De Maegd-

[3] According to Maeterlinck's concept, therefore, in this more hidden, more difficult to access sphere of a work of art, there is a desire at work connected to “loftier truth,” which in drama is revealed by *the level of dialogue that goes beyond or lies beneath* the plot based on cause and effect, alluding to secret thoughts. In this way, the work of art reflects the structure of the soul insofar as it connects, beyond the surface, conscious level, with those contents that lie below the level that can be rationally controlled by the conscious mind. In his essay, Maeterlinck makes it clear that contemporary psychological discoveries had a fertile influence on his dramatic theory, when he concludes his train of thought with the following statement: “And if we are bewildered at times, let us not forget that our soul often appears to our feeble eyes to be but the maddest of forces, and that there are in man many regions more fertile, more profound and more interesting than those of his reason or his intelligence....” (MAETERLINCK 2000: 35) Maeterlinck's philosophical reflections on art point to the phenomenon of hidden, secondary dialogue that does not fit into the superficial structure of cause and effect, more specifically, to the part of the unconscious referred to as the *collective unconscious* in Jung's conceptual system, arguing that the recipients of works of art that are artistically authentic and “operate" on a second level can connect with the laws of the inner lives of humans, which are revealed in dreams, images, metaphors, and symbols. Jung’s well-known study “On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry” (JUNG: URL) offers an interesting comparison to this topic.

Soëp found no trace of any particular interest in Chekhov when studying Maeterlinck's letters and notes, even though the Belgian author had demonstrably read some of the Russian writer's works. The highlighted and underlined parts in the German and French translated volumes of Chekhov in his possession suggest that he was primarily interested in stories[4] that lead the reader to metaphysical questions. At the same time, Maegd-Soëp herself emphasizes the typological similarities between Maeterlinck's and Chekhov's dramaturgy, referring above all to the use of *silence/listening*[5] as an artistic device of particular importance in Maeterlinck's poetics. However, based on the (in)frequency of his entries, the Russian writer's plays did not arouse particular interest in the Belgian fellow author, who marked only one line (spoken by Serebryakov) in *Uncle Vanya* in both his German and French translations (MAEGD-SOËP 1995: 371–375).

Despite all of the above, Maeterlinck's dramaturgical model is clearly linked to Chekhov's plays in the Russian theatrical environment. It is not by chance or coincidence that, following his personal meeting with Maeterlinck in June 1908, Stanislavski sent copies of Chekhov's works to the Belgian author (MAEGD-SOËP 1995: 372). Maeterlinck's ideas about the ideal theater are also reflected in Stanislavski's work *My Life in Art* (*Моя жизнь в искусстве*)[6] in the part where he discusses the staging of Chekhov's plays. In connection with the interpretation of *The Seagull*, for example, he notes that it is the inner feelings that cannot be conveyed by words and are hidden *under* them or *in the pauses* that give the work its essential meaning. According to Stanislavski, Chekhov proved that "stage action must be understood in an inner sense and that it alone, cleansed of everything pseudo-stage, can be used to build and base dramatic works in the theater." (STANISLAVSKI 1954: URL) "Internal action" must therefore take precedence over external action (remember Maeterlinck's idea of *motionless theater*). Meanwhile, in order to convey deep spiritual content on stage, the actor or actress must use the technique of recalling personal memories (*psychotechnique*). It is in his/her gestures (see the author's instructions on Astrov's whistling), his/her gaze, or the character's accidental slips of the tongue or silences that the expression of the complex of feelings and thoughts hidden deep within is achieved.

Chekhov's plays are thus linked in Stanislavski's oeuvre with new findings in psychology: the stage director is equally interested in *facilitating the depic-*

[4] *The Looking-Glass [Зеркало], On the Road [На пути], A Misfortune [Несчастье], Lady N—'s Story [Рассказ госпожи NN], Verochka [Верочка], Beauties [Красавицы], In The Court [В суде], Gooseberries [Крыжовник]*.

[5] Cf. the chapter titled "Silence" in Maeterlinck's aforementioned collection (*Le tresors des humbles*).

[6] Stanislavski's autobiographical piece was first published in English in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1924; while it was first published in Russian in a revised form in 1926 in Moscow.

tion of unconscious psychological processes; *the unfolding of the universal content constructed on the plane beneath the text*; *and the "psycho-technique" of the artistic method applied during the process of staging*. In terms of both the subject matter and the method of staging, he focuses on the underlying meaning, as evidenced by the recurring use of the concepts of *subtext* and *subconscious* in his theoretical works.

The contemporary and post-stage life of Chekhov's plays confirms the fact, based also on knowledge of his prose and dramaturgy, that Chekhov, who originally had the qualification of a doctor, took a keen interest in the new direction of psychology that emerged in the last two decades of the 19th century (see BUNYAEVA 2012: 124–128). He incorporated his thoughts on this new approach into his poetics in a certain form, giving artistic expression to his own observations as a doctor and health psychologist, which focused on human behavior patterns, mental illness, the causes of suicide, and the complex relationship between dreams and real life. Consider but a few examples from the long list of his works that feature psychological disorders as artistic themes or motifs: *Volodya* (*Володя*, 1887), *Sleepy* (*Спать хочется*, 1888), *A Boring Story* (*Скучная история*, 1889), *A Nervous Breakdown* (*Припадок*, 1889), *Ward No. 6* (*Палата № 6*, 1892) and *The Black Monk* (*Чёрный монах*, 1894). However, beyond the artistic source material, it is the artistic treatment of the content conveyed *in the depth of the text* that most evidently demonstrates the significance of Chekhov's manner of expression, which can also be read from the perspective of psychoanalytic ideas about personality structure while being close to the poetics of symbolism, in his oeuvre.

Csaba Lászlóffy, the Transylvanian author who died in 2015, was perhaps prompted by Chekhov's poetics and his distinguished attention to psychology to transform the theme indicated in the introduction to this study, the Russian-related historical episode of psychoanalysis, into a stage piece, and to link it to Chekhovian poetics in order to assist its reception by his readers. In the framework of the current train of thought, I wish to point out just briefly that there are clear precedents for the choice of subject matter in Csaba Lászlóffy's oeuvre. In fact, for quite some time before writing the play, he had shown a serious interest in Russian culture[7] as well as the method and the history of psychology as a science.[8]

[7] See further details in: REGÉCZI 2018: 85–86.

[8] The literature on Lászlóffy refers to his works as "ruthless psychoanalytic readings" (KORPA 2014) and uses concepts such as "psychic personality insight" and "self-dissecting existential analysis" (BERTHA 2014: 213). It is imbued with passions revealed by this "ruthless psychoanalytic" gaze that the figure familiar from the (Russian) past is resurrected in Lászlóffy's prose, drama and poetry to live an old-new life. The definitions given by the critics and literary interpreters to the characteristic poetic image of the works coincide with the author's ars poetica, which reveals a

When decoding the title of *The Hundred-Year-Old Torso*, our attention is drawn, on the one hand, to the temporal distance and the timeless perspective of the series of events evoked by the act of memory; while on the other hand, the term torso implies the *appearance* of incompleteness. In art, this term is used to refer to sculptures that have been deliberately created without a head and/or limbs. Thus, these are not fragments of works that have been left incomplete, but rather the result of a *conscious* decision to depict or portray *a part instead of the whole*. In the depiction of the part, the great masters of creating torsos, especially Michelangelo, find a new sculptural artistry, where the part (the human torso) appears as "an object of the unconscious depths of life" (YBL 1912: 676). The Lászlóffy piece, through the evocation of a past story and also, due to its miniature size, suggests the significance of the part rather than evoking the whole. It focuses on a part of the actual events it recalls, marking Sabina's perspective as a point of reference.

Sabina Spielrein was admitted to the Burghölzli Clinic in Zurich in 1904 with symptoms of schizoid hysteria. She was Jung's first patient to undergo psychoanalysis, later becoming his lover and then his colleague. The play follows the stages of this process in the form of scenes from the past and Sabina's revelation during therapy. The female protagonist of the piece appears in two forms (Sabina and Sabina 2): in the words of the author's instructions, in the form of Sabina "drifting into conflict" and in the form of Sabina "remembering" (LÁSZLÓFFY 2010–2011: 33), providing a dramaturgical solution that also ensures the simultaneous and continuous presence of two planes of time.

In the play, Sabina's realizations about her self-healing abilities (LÁSZLÓ-FFY 2010–2011: 34), about the significance of her dreams and about her roles resulting from Jung's attitude, labeled as bourgeois, as well as her replica bringing Jung's later key concept of "shadow"[9] into play, form a series of moments that are biographically authentic. These are made tangible and experiential for the reader or viewer of the play by the woman's self-commentary, her foregrounded perspective and her growing female self-awareness, moving from a subordinate position to one of equality. In assessing Jung's, i.e. the analyst's, behavior in crossing the boundaries of the therapeutic relationship, beyond the dominance of the woman's perspective, the figure of

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serious interest in the methods of psychoanalysis. It is not by chance that Lászlóffy wrote a prose text titled *The Empty Mask, or the Traumas of Psychoanalysis* (2002), dedicated to the memory of Sándor Ferenczi, or a play about Freud titled *The Crumbling Idol* (2003) before *The Hundred-Year-Old Torso*, which is about the story of Sabina Spielrein.

[9] Sabina, whom Jung initially convinces through psychotherapeutic hypnosis that she had had terrible experiences, but was not aware of them, searches for the shadow of the lie. In addition, the author's instructions also incorporate the metaphorical meaning of the term shadow into the interpretation, describing Jung's character as a "wavering shadow figure" at the end of Sabina's self-revelation.

Freud plays a key part, whose words take on special emphasis due to his position as an outside observer and his role of the analyst conducting the therapy.

Distinct and distanced from the idiom so close to psychological terminology used by the other characters (Sabina, Sabina 2 and Jung), Freud communicates here in a more literary or metaphorical language. His very first words in the play already strike this "chatty" tone, representing figurative speech:

> *„Á, kegyed csak úgy megvált attól az elragadó férfitól, s most bizonyára idegenkedve néz körül az én szőrrel bélelt medvebarlangomban!…"* [verbatim: "Ah, your grace has parted from that charming man just like that and, now, is surely looking around with aversion in my fur-lined bear den!..."] (LÁSZLÓFFY 2010–2011: 49)

The metaphor of the bear den foreshadows Sabina's experience of encountering herself, which takes place in Freud's soft, protective environment that encourages the exploration of the inner world. Freud's next remark comes only at the end of Sabina 2's revelation, when the analyst is once again "paternalistic" (Sabina 2's expression: cf. LÁSZLÓFFY 2010–2011: 57) and presents himself in a manner that suggests safety and security. Once again, his conclusion is not expressed in the usual lingo of analysis. At the end of the therapy (or as its final episode), Freud is leafing through a book, from which he quotes at length:

> *Emberek, oroszlánok, sasok és foglyok, agancsos szarvasok, libák, pókok, vízben élő néma halak, tengeri csillagok és azok, kik szemmel nem láthatók – egyszóval minden élet, minden élet, minden élet szomorú körforgását befejezte és kihunyt. Már egymillió éve nem hord a Föld a hátán egyetlen élőlényt sem.…* [Men, lions, eagles, and partridges, horned deer, geese, spiders, silent fish that dwell in the deep, starfish, and creatures invisible to the eye—these and all living things, all, all living things, having completed their sad cycle, are no more… For thousands of years the earth has borne no living creature.][10] (LÁSZLÓFFY 2010–2011: 57)

The quote from Chekhov's play *The Seagull* comes from Nina's monolog, which is part of Treplev's work on the one hand, while on the other hand, it is a longer element of a replica that recurs throughout Chekhov's play. As regards its content, the monolog of the "common world soul" imparts the idea of the eternal immutability of the soul and illustrates the infinite loneliness of the psyche, while through its repetitive function, it conveys Nina's transformation.

[10] The Chekhov quote used here is in the translation of Ann Dunnigan (CHEKHOV 2006: 100).

At first, when reciting the monologue of the "world soul" (and in the dialogue surrounding the play), the young girl creates a distance between herself and the text, expressing her incomprehension of it. Then, at the end of the play, as part of her self-revelation to Treplev, she herself invokes and incorporates into her self-identifying lines those fictional words from the play that appear functionless on the surface of the text and seem "superfluous" but, at the same time, bursting forth from the unconscious, they gain meaning on a secondary level by triggering a wide range of associations through their symbolic expression.

In Lászlóffy's play, it is worth examining how the quotation works in both contexts. On the one hand, the Chekhov passage is a metaphorical device for expressing the experience of existence cast into infinity, the longing for another living being, that is, a companion. In this function, it elevates Sabina's disappointment to a universal existential situation, a general feeling of romantic disappointment and, at the same time, an eternal love triangle[11] story. On the other hand, the quotation, just as the recurring element in Chekhov's play, also makes it possible to follow the development of the relationship between men and women. In this way, the words from Trepljev's play, evoked by Freud, retrospectively illuminate the dramatically unfolding master–disciple (Jung–Sabina) relationship and also make us rethink the dramatic subject matter in the light of the connection between Trigorin and Nina.

The relevance of Freud's seemingly unrelated quotation is reinforced by Sabina 2's reaction, who dreads that "he [i.e., Jung – I.R.] will be able to simply 'borrow' the entire elaboration of the idea" (LÁSZLÓFFY 2010–2011: 58). The presumed appropriation of the new professional idea (which is reinforced by the appearance of Jungian terms in Sabina's monologue), together with distrust of the master considered great once, and even the disappointment leading to thoughts of suicide and then the rebirth for/through work, all form a series of motifs in the remembering Sabina's monologue, which creates a similarity to the role of Nina in *The Seagull*. In this way, Freud actually leads to the final result of the analysis of Sabina's former feelings through Chekhov's words. Sabina 2 supplements this finding, this image that can be understood as a *mise en abyme*, or a literary insert, by retelling the details that reinforce the parallels between Trigorin and Jung, and Nina and Sabina, thus providing a potential explanation for the workings of feelings and the impulses behind actions. At the same time, the possibility arises that Freud's role in this peculiar triangular situation can be read in conjunction with the character of Treplev in *The Seagull*, suggesting that there are more complex motivations behind the Viennese psychiatrist's jovial, understanding support. However, the text does not offer this possibility; the transformation of the relationship between Jung and Freud is only subtly indicated by the character's involvement in the theatrical action. More important than that is the position of the analyst, who observes the love affair from the outside.

[11] Jung is married and strongly bound by bourgeois conventions.

At the end of my interpretation, I wish to return to the idea that, in my opinion, the aspect of playing with Chekhovian intertextuality stems from Chekhovian poetics itself, based on its subtextual significance, as well as from its sensitive portrayal of human beings, which anticipates certain observations of depth psychology. It stems from the dramaturgical peculiarity that, in the afterlife of the plays, is linked to the theoretical knowledge that Freud's teachings spread in certain intellectual circles in Russia, including the ones around the theaters. In my view, the Hungarian author Csaba Lászlóffy also responded to this coincidence when he found Chekhov's words as a summary of the therapy between Jung and Sabina Spielrein as well as the one between Freud and Sabina, which he relived in his imagination and rewrote artistically in a miniature form. These are words that are enigmatic in Chekhov's play: not revealing themselves at first glance, but interpretable on a "second level." Words that form a web that covers the entire drama, evoking Nina's love that ends in disappointment and her relationship with her rival in the creative process. Words about the place occupied by humans and other living beings in the universe. Thus, we seem to return to Maeterlinck's type of ideal: these are words that speak *from beyond* the first level of dialogue.

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