What more can we know about Chekhov?

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CHEKHOV’S WORK
If we thirst to know more about Chekhov than, say, about Tolstoy, one of the reasons is that he wrote relatively so little. True, his collected works (not counting letters) amount to some eighteen volumes, but if we subtract from them all the juvenilia (most of which requires a lot of hindsight to see as the work of a budding genius), we are left with a body of work that will fit quite comfortably into one volume.

Like most writers, Chekhov achieves classic status only when he is sufficiently well-off (or well-paid) to write only what he wants to write. He reached that stage in 1888 not long before his thirtieth birthday, after the public acknowledgement of Steppe. If we consider that Chekhov was virtually lost to literature for 1890, the year of his trek to Sakhalin, and that his health collapses in spring 1897, Chekhov's prime is a mere seven years, little longer than Lermontov's. True, three of the major four plays The Seagull, Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters, The Cherry Orchard and half a dozen of his greatest stories from Lady with Dog to The Bride are yet to be written, but Chekhov averaged just one page of print a week for his last seven years. Thus his chief occupation between 1897 and 1904 was not writing but dying.

The problems of Chekhov’s reception lie not in any flaw in his work, not in any difficulty in interpreting it (however perverse some theatre directors and critics are). The problem that leads to bursts of impatience with yet another reading of Lady with Dog or staging of Uncle Vanya stem from over-familiarity. Ibsen gives us over a dozen masterpieces for the stage; Chekhov gives us just four. There is so much Leskov that every re-reading is a rediscovery. It is perfectly feasible, however, to
learn all Chekhov's best stories by heart. The contemptuous remarks attributed to Petersburg's literati — Anna Akhmatova's dismissal of all Chekhov as 'grey', Osip Mandelstam's insistence on putting a stop to Three Sisters at the end of Act 1 by issuing them all a one-way rail ticket to Moscow— originate from contempt bred by familiarity.

What is the solution (apart from a moratorium on all publication, reading and mention of Chekhov for twenty years)? One way out is to look for more. Surely there must be lost Chekhov in archives and attics? Unfortunately, circumstance mitigate against this. We have virtually no tvorcheskaia laboratorii for Chekhov. Neither his sister Maria Pavlovna nor his widow Olga Knipper were by nature or inclination a second Mrs Dostoevsky or Mrs T. S. Eliot to salvage every scrap of paper or notebook from the bin. Olga Knipper had no need of such pension material: she was a well-paid actress. Chekhov's sister carefully cherished and sorted every letter that Chekhov received, especially from her girl friends, but she took little interest in his fiction. Chekhov himself was contemptuous of his own manuscripts: he destroyed them as soon as the publisher or theatre had a copy. One of the few to survive, the fair hand-written copy of The Cherry Orchard does so only because Chekhov was too ill to crumple it up. So we have virtually no unpublished work or unprinted variants with which to enrich the body of his work. All we have are the variants between the first publication and the collected works, when between 1898 and 1902 Chekhov revised and cut his early stories for Adolf Marx's collected edition.

Death left just one major work unfinished. If we look at the six pages that survive of Rasstroistvo kompensatsii (Disturbance of the balance, a nineteenth-century medical term for the fatal effect on another organ of the disease of the first), we can see that this is the beginning of a very complex story, told from three points of view, centring around a dying man. It is clearly the third story in a trilogy: The Bishop, The Bride being the first two stories. In each a man dies, leaving bereft a mother, a bride (admittedly not his) and, in Rasstroistvo kompensatsii a sister. Impossible not to see these three stories as a valediction from a dying Chekhov to the three women closest to him (in blood and law, if not reality). But nowhere, not even in Chekhov's cryptic notebooks, is there a plan or a hint of a plan on how this story was to develop, let alone end. It defies sequels. We can account for virtually every day of the last third of Chekhov's life. So many friends, lovers, relatives, enemies, rivals observed him, and, living with his parents and at least one sibling, he had very few hours of solitude. We can even work out when he was writing what. There is simply no gap in time in the Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva where Chekhov could have written any lost play or story. True, there has been speculation about a novel he was planning in the late 1880s, but the only convincing explanation of the fate of this material is that it was, unwisely, recycled into The Wood Demon. As one might expect from such a green writer, Chekhov believed in recycling. If he had written anything unpublished, or even inadequately treated, he would take the material again and reuse it for a new story or play.

The early period, when Chekhov was a student or doctor first and a hack writer second, is the only period when Chekhov escaped observation for long enough to have written work of which we are not aware.
But when we consider the phenomenal productivity of the early 1880s, sometimes three stories in a week, as well as the demands of the medical faculty of Moscow university, it is not easy to see how he could have written anything that has escaped us. Russian scholars for forty years have been combing all the weeklies of Moscow and St Petersburg for anonymous or unsigned works that might be Chekhov's.

There is a strikingly reliable technique for assigning authorship, a technique used by Kjetsaa provisionally at least to acquit Sholokhov of having stolen *Quiet Flows the Don* from Kriuchkov. This is the index of sentence length variability, which has been tested satisfactorily on a number of texts since St Paul's epistles. We may change our syntax, our vocabulary, our register, but the way in which we range from short to long sentences is apparently innate. This technique has not resulted in a single new attribution to Chekhov.

If new Chekhov works don't exist, we have to invent them, then. This technique has not, as far as I know, been tried in Russia, where the chances of getting away with it are nil. It has, by implication, been tried by the American translator Peter Constantine who announced three years ago his Undiscovered Chekhov which announced that he had been combing all the Oskolki, Budilnik, Svetoten' and so on in New York Public library and implied in ambiguous terms that he had stumbled across previously unknown Chekhov. There was no need for Peter Constantine to risk asthma leafing through dusty bound periodicals. Everything he 'found', as a number of indignant reviewers have pointed out, is in all three Soviet editions of Chekhov's collected works.

A more devious approach was tried on Penguin Books three years ago. The daughter (allegedly) of a British army officer who had processed Russian prisoners of war in Germany, announced that she had a manuscript (of unknown provenance) taken from a Russian prisoner of war, which contained a number of detective stories written by Dr Chekhov. I was one of the sceptics consulted for Penguin. Naturally, one's first question was the whereabouts of the original from which the English translation had been made (it was never forthcoming). Secondly, one asked how Chekhov could write such rambling, self-regarding introspective prose, so self-indulgent and stylistically lax. Why were all the Russian words sprinkled in the text in strange cases (Genitive, Dative)? If there was any sign of genius in these stories, it was in the anticipation of the talents of Grigori Chkhartishvili aka Boris Akunin in creating an amiable Tsarist St Petersburg and Moscow.

Unfortunately Penguin have kept secret the name of the perpetrator of this fraud, but at least any 'new' Chekhov works will now be subjected to cynical scrutiny. There are, however, small pieces of Chekhov's work which remained to be unearthed. There may well be in the archives of the Odessa educational district (presumably later moved to Kharkov and then to Kiev) Chekhov's school essays, particularly his matriculation piece 'There is no greater evil than anarchy'. Not only is it one of the few Chekhov pieces that has a political theme, it was the first of his works to receive an official commendation or its literary finish. The Taganrog Chekhov archive has been controlled by the Cerberus—like Konopliova and has never been open by more than a few millimetres to outsiders. It is quite possible that other school work by Chekhov has survived.
The next untapped source is the archive of Moscow University's medical faculty. Chekhov, like very other medical student, had to write a number of *historiae morbi* for his tutors and professors. At least three are known (none of them is to be found in the Collect Works). One was published in a collection of 1947, an autopsy of Efimov, a drunken peasant who in 1884 hanged himself by a sash from a beam in the latrine of a Moscow house. Another is the study of a case of neonatal syphilis (Kurnukova), and the first page is reproduced in *Dr Miove's Meditisina v tvorchestve Chekhova*, and the paper itself is probably still in Miove's archive in Kiev. A third piece, in RGALI, with annotations by Chekhov's colleague Dr Rossolimo, is an account of a psychotherapeutic exercise in which a young railway clerk, Bulychiov, is treated for compulsive masturbation by a series of cold baths and instructions to visit prostitutes. The two pieces on Efimov and Bulychiov are in fact of some interest for a study of Chekhov's fiction. The autopsy is to be a key event in a number of stories, notably *Po delam sluzhby*, while Bulychiov, the sexually disturbed youth, metamorphoses into a number of Chekhovian characters, from Volodia to Treplev. There are presumably dozens of these pieces still buried away in the university archives, and it is the job of some future scholar to bluff his or her way in until they are found.

If 'There is no greater evil than anarchy' may be the first of Chekhov's few political manifestos, then the last, too, has been lost. This was an interview that Chekhov gave in Spring 1897, in Paris, and in French, to the noted Jewish journalist and prominent Dreyfusard, Bernard Lazare. The interview went on for at least two hours; Lazare appears to have been satisfied enough with the interview to have edited it for publication in *L'Aurore*. Chekhov apparently was unsure of the editing and refused permission for publication. A Lazare society and archive exist, Lazare has actively interested heirs, but the text—in fact every trace—of the interview has vanished. Possibly, it lies in the vaults of *L'Aurore* and if found would help scotch the ill-founded view of Chekhov as an apolitical writer. If French Chekhovians cannot be bothered to look, then perhaps somebody here will?

That, as far as Chekhov's lost works are concerned, may be all we can look for. There is no 10th Symphony to be completed by a Derek Cooke, because there are no sketches that survive. The notebooks contain a number of odd images and aphorisms, even plot summaries in a sentence, that might well have been used for unwritten stories, but whoever reconstructed them would have to have Chekhov's genius.

**THE LETTERS**

Abram Yarmolinsky's and Gordon McVay's anthologies of Chekhov's letters suggest that Chekhov's letters are as important to readers, at least Anglophone readers, as his fiction. True, Chekhov as a letter-writer could be very cautious and evasive. From the mid-1890s, when he realised that his fame meant that his letters would become, even in his lifetime, public property, he began to be extremely careful what he said and how he said it. In my view, Chekhov's letters lose half their significance if they are not published (as they have now been in Russian, see *Perepiska* in 3 volumes) as part of a bilateral correspondence. To certain correspondents, however, Chekhov's letters are epistolary masterpieces. To his elder brothers, to Aleksei Suvorin, his tycoon, his Mephistopheles, his best friend, they are self-revelatory.
To women, from his early conquests, to the pestering Antonovkas and even to Olga Knipper, Chekhov’s letters astound us by their refusal to answer, to commit, to reveal. In itself, that is fascinating, for Chekhov can be said to treat his readers much as he treated his importunate admirers and mistresses, forcing them to read the unpleasant message between the urbane lines.

Naturally, as soon as somebody becomes famous and begins to write less interesting letters, these letters are religiously preserved. While Chekhov’s early correspondence has large gaps, much of what he wrote to his uncle and cousin in Taganrog in the 1880s we know was destroyed by a contemptuous wife of one of his cousins, others could not be expected to survive in the bohemian world of Chekhov’s friends and relatives in the 1880s, there are relatively few groups of letters which may well survive somewhere to be unearthed by a suitably persistent enquirer.

Two batches of letters which might, if not written by Chekhov, be called love letters are missing. One set of letters was written to Elena Pleshcheeva, the daughter of the poet Pleshcheev who suddenly inherited a million roubles before he died. Elena Pleshcheeva was mooted as a suitable Petersburg wife for Chekhov. While he demurred, he certainly appeared to have maintained a courtship of a kind. Like at least twenty other women, Elena Pleshcheeva gave up waiting for a surrender or a definitive answer from Anton Pavlovich and married a safe, rich aristocrat, Baron de Staël von Holstein. The family moved later to Scandinavia and Britain, and have not shown much interest in searching for Elena’s hidden letters.

A later set of letters must have been written to Suvarin’s governess, Emilie Bijon, an enterprising Frenchwoman who abandoned her illegitimate son in Alsace, to become governess in Suvarin’s household. She flirted with Aleksandr and Anton, who bandaged her leg when she fell of a wardrobe. Chekhov and his sister kept a dozen letters from Emilie, and it is known that Chekhov composed his letters to her in French. Emilie Bijon can be traced. She returned to France after the revolution and fed and housed her former employers when part of the Suvarin family fled to France. The letters were passed on to two Bijon nieces who, when I inquired, were both, with a trunkful of possessions, in an old folks’ home in Neufchatel (Switzerland). Chekhov’s letters are no the Aspern papers, and in any case these marginalia, Chekhov letters in French to a woman who, for all her unhappy exile and pathetic infatuation with Chekhov, had considerable character, irony and self-respect.

LETTERS TO CHEKHOV
Chekhov’s gift as a writer was to provoke his collocutors, whether actresses, siblings, publishers, into unwonted frankness, uncontrolled outburst, even bad verse. The already extraordinary letters written to Anton by his eldest brother Aleksandr show a Boswellian bawdiness and inventiveness that Anton provoked. Here there is much more to be revealed. Ivan Luppol published these letters with a number of omissions and cuts in 1939 (and despite his discretion, died in the GULAG shortly afterwards). The Otdel rukopisei archives in Moscow allow us to reconstitute the missing phrases (many of which I included in my biography), but there are whole letters yet to emerge, and plans to publish them.

Few writers have kept so zealously all the letters written to them as did Anton Chekhov, including letters
that most men would have burned on receipt. Carefully kept in shoe boxes by his sister Maria Pavlovna, they were all released into the archives by the 1960s. Here and there Maria Chekhov inked out phrases she felt were not fit for public perusal, sometimes on instructions from Chekhov’s friends, such as Frants Shekhtel who became a famous art nouveau architect and did not want his wild oats phase revealed.

One area with major gaps are the letters and telegrams of Olga Knipper to her lover and husband. When she published the correspondence, on her own and later with the assistance of her acolyte Vilenkin, she severely cut anything that reflected badly on her or might damage relations with those still alive, these of course are the most interesting parts of her correspondence, where she slags off every one of Chekhov’s previous women friends and hints at their bisexuality, their scrappiness, their lack of talent. But Olga Knipper and her circle went further. They removed from the archives key documents: the telegram about Olga Knipper’s miscarriage, not to mention a certificate (already archived) that she was three months pregnant in February 1902. Olga Knipper’s correspondence with Anton is translated into English and even being republished in Russian with the same unjustifiable cuts. Even from what is left in the archives, however, a portrait of a marriage can be constructed, a marriage which seems to have been the collective revenge of all Chekhov’s discarded mistresses.

Of all the losses from the archives, however, by far the most important are the several hundred letters Aleksei Suvorin wrote to Chekhov between 1887 and 1904. Theirs was not just a publisher-writer or patient-doctor or father-son friendship, it was a meeting of two overburdened depressives, two provincials transplanted to the metropolis, two lonely geniuses, two men hit by tragedy. Chekhov by the deaths of his brother, uncles and aunt from TB, Suvorin by the half—suicide, half—murder of his first wife, the suicide of his son Volodia and deaths of his daughter Sasha and son Valerian. Chekhov flirted with Suvorin’s young second wife, his governess, his daughter and his granddaughters. The friendship survived gaps of temperament, political outlook and morality: only the Dreyfus affair came near to destroying it… We have Chekhov’s letters to Suvorin; if only we had Suvorin’s letters, we would have, just to judge by Suvorin’s epistolary style by his extant diary, one of the most important correspondence in the world. Suvorin took special pains to ensure he got those letters back: on Chekhov’s death he offered the family unlimited credit to cover their financial needs on condition that the letters were returned. He employed Chekhov’s eldest and youngest brothers and sent them down separately to Yalta to retrieve from Maria Chekhov all his letters. They were last seen deposited with Suvorin’s diary in a St Petersburg bank in 1917.

The fact is that much of the diary was smuggled out to Suvorin’s sons in Belgrade in the early 1920s. They even began to publish extracts until they could no longer stand their father’s disparaging references to them. It is very likely that the Suvorin-Chekhov letters also made their way to Belgrade. A fair amount of Suvorin material survives in the archive of the rector of Belgrade university, Belic, in the Serbian national archives. When I searched briefly in 1996 it was no time for a British researcher to be making enquiries in Belgrade, particularly in an archive whose director had just nominated Radovan Karadzic for a Nobel peace prize. It may well be that Russian troops had made a bonfire of the mis-
sing parts of Suvorin’s diary and his letters to Chekhov in the Voevodina in 1945, but archivists did accompany the Red Army and were unlikely to have allowed such a bonfire. A proper search has yet to be made.

**LETTERS MENTIONING CHEKHOV**

We should remember that Chekhov lived during the zenith of the Russian postal service, when a letter posted in Moscow in the evening reached St Petersburg in the morning, and a letter from Yalta to Nice took a mere four days. Thus in Russia between 1880 and 1913 one of the world’s largest masses of epistolary material accumulated. If 4,500 of Chekhov’s own letters survive, and over 10,000 written to him and his family, then the number of letters exchanged between Chekhov’s friends, relatives and literary contacts in which one might reasonably expect a reference to him must reach six figures. While researchers have read all the letters written to Chekhov (almost all in OR RGB, a few in RGALI), there is still a mass in RGALI and IRLI yet to be studied.

What is odd is that the correspondences I have sampled (and I imagine a number of others), letters written over many years by intimate acquaintances, often barely mention Anton Pavlovich at all. The archive of Tatiana Lvovna Shchepkina Kupernik (the bisexual translator and poet who lived to 1952) includes decades of regular letters exchanged with other women friends of Chekhov, Maria Krestovskaia, Lidia Iavorskaia, with his brothers and his sister, with his publishers, with Suvorin. During Chekhov’s lifetime, one might argue, discretion made her disinclined to discuss him, but after her death she is equally reticent. The same goes for letters written by Iavorskaia (very few letters written to her survived her escape to London and Hove). More surprising still, the 50 years’ correspondence between Chekhov’s sister and widow, a fascinating and dramatic account of two antagonists making their peace and dividing the spoils of Chekhoviana between them, barely mentions the man who linked them. Not a single phrase uttered by Chekhov, or an action, or even an emotional response is mentioned from 1904 to 1957. Among Chekhov’s heirs, it was only the jackals, Vasily Rozanov and Nikolai Mikhailovich Ezhov, who referred to him at any length, and then in the spirit of Alexei Suvorin (their protector and patron after Chekhov’s death) who clearly never forgave Chekhov for dying before him and instituted a policy of degradation.

Nevertheless, only a fraction of the cross-correspondence, as one might call it, has been examined, and somewhere we may yet retrieve some insight into Chekhov as observed by his contemporaries.

The Soviet series v vospominaniiakh sovremennikov is of course full of interesting revelations, but these have been in the public domain (with varying editions for half a century now). Moreover, these vospominaniiia tend to the hagiographic, to the polite tone of a conventional obituary. A new source was first used in Literaturnoe nasledstvo in 1968 and carried on in the footnotes to the great (if imperfect) 30 volume edition of the 1970s-80s. This was Chekhov mentioned in contemporary diaries. Diary entries about Chekhov in his life time are quite another matter from posthumous memories. The literary small-fry, such as Leontiev-Shcheglov, the publisher and humorist Nikolai Leikin or the Petersburg dramatist Sofia Smirnova-Sazonova had complex, often bruising encounters with Chekhov, while Suvorin’s great diary shows Chekhov as the silent
psychotherapist. The diaries so far used (Sazonova’s diaries amount to some 64 volumes in IRLI, but only a tiny selective publication is planned) make one wish to explore further. One diary recorded as existing in the recent Biografia russkikh pisatelei is that of the venomous Viktor Burenin (a man who first promoted Chekhov and then cruelly parodied him Nine brides and not a single groom). That diary has not been located: some deny its existence, others surmise that it is forgotten in an IRLI spetskhran. But if we list the index of Letopis’ zhizni i tvorchestvo Chekhova and then check all the archive catalogues for diary material, we will undoubtedly unearth yet more.

As I said, most Chekhov relics are in archives which are responsible, rational and open: IRLI, RGALI, OR RGB. But a significant amount of material is to be found in the archive of MKhAT, and I know of no researcher who has been able to ascertain what is held in that most secret of archives (after all MKhAT, like the whole archive service of the USSR, was in part an agency of the Lubianka), let alone been free to roam. Many of us have had a series of rebuffs, interspersed by some days of serendipity, enough to conclude that archives of the director Sanin-Shenberg (and thus of Lika Mizinova, the most understanding and patient of Chekhov’s women friends, who later married Sanin), not to mention of those who loathed him and Olga Knipper, such as Maria Andreeva (the 2nd Mrs Gorky) have far more to reveal.

Provincial archivists are often (not always) just as unforthcoming. The largest unexplored archive in Taganrog contains, to judge by some cursory nosing, far more than we have yet been told, while the Yalta archive (from which a number of items have mysteriously disappeared to turn up in the German collector’s market) is likewise used by its main archivist as a private pension fund. The present political climate in Russia does not raise one’s hopes much, but at least we can smell where the bodies are buried.

CHEKHOV STUDIES

It is easy to draw up a bibliography that will show each of Chekhov’s stories subjected to a close reading and textual analysis, and each of the major plays the subject of an interpretative monograph. Since Aleksandrov Chudakov’s Poetika Chekhova in 1973 the work of formalist critics such as Bitsili on Chekhov’s narrative techniques has resumed. Anniversaries of birth and death have given us volumes of conference proceedings which have dealt with reception, intertextuality, ideology, as well as questions of poetics and genres. Perhaps the signal of the death or mausoleum of Chekhov studies is the announcement and funding of a Chekhov Encyclopaedia.

Arguably, these studies can be done again and again, without finding new texts or apparatus, providing there is an escalation in the insight and clarity of the critical mind that deals with it. Since computerization, of course, new possibilities have opened up for research, although as was once said of such research, it gives the answers to questions that would never be posed by a normal human mind. Once all Chekhov is encoded on a CD, then a day’s work by the computer will produce a Slovar’ iazyka Chekhova (what once took a whole institute a decade to do for Pushkin). We can have word frequencies, we can trace the evolution of a phrase, an adjective, a construction from early to late Chekhov. This would certainly produce a dictionary of Standard
literary Russian in the 1890s, but how much more it would tell us about Chekhov I am not sure. There are writers who create their own skaz, and idiolect: Thomas Hardy, Leskov; and there are those, like Chekhov, who work within the received norms. What would be more interesting is to verify statistically what one notices casually: that Chekhov’s language is osmotic, it absorbs phrases used in his presence, in letters to him, in his reading. Sometimes the absorption is so extensive, that the author must have known what was happening and intended the literary text to refer back to the original source and the fate of that person. Thus Lika Mizinova’s letters are broken up for phrases used in Bolshoi volodia i malykii Volodia, as well as in The Seagull. The remarks made by Suvorin’s son before he killed himself are given to Treplev in The Seagull; Old Taganrog phrases recalled by Aleksandr in his letters to Anton, Propadai moia telega, vse chetyre kolesa go into Vishniyov sad (just as the title Anna na shee came from Aleksandr’s bitter description of his unhappy dying first wife). In other words, if we digitalized not just Chekhov’s texts but the texts he read (we can hardly deal with what he heard), we would understand far better how he literally lets characters speak their own language.

If we take Mandelstam’s well-known declaration that a biography of a writer is the list of the books he has read, then we certainly have a new way of tackling Chekhov. It would not be practicable for a study of Tolstoy: no critic could live long enough to catch up with everything Tolstoy had read as well as written. There are, of course, difficulties with Chekhov. Like Stalin’s library, Chekhov’s was plundered by friends and thus dispersed after he died. Unlike Stalin, Chekhov was fastidious about not leaving pencilled remarks in the margin or greasy thumbprints on the page. We cannot be sure of the many books that passed through his hands — for instance several hundred that he bought in order to give to Taganrog Public Library — which he read and which he did not before sending them. But given his osmotic powers, it would not be hard to tell. If you read Leskov and Ostrovsky; you keep coming across phrases that have crossed over into Chekhov — Leskov’s ‘Vy nastupili na moiu liubimuu mozol’, ‘Kakoi ty umnyi Petia’ (from Ostrovsky’s Poklonniki i talanty), for instance. The Russian texts of Maupassant (whom Chekhov never found comfortable reading in the original) provide the opening lines of The Seagull (it is Madame Walter who is first asked why she is wearing in black and replies ‘in mourning for my own life’). But there are many other texts which are not re-read today and deserve to be, in order to fit Chekhov into his context. Sidney Jones’ opera The Geisha with its three English officers and three geishas, especially in the Russian version, has a number of textual overlaps (as well as primacy in plot) with Three Sisters. So does the biography (largely cobbled in 1895 together from Mrs Gaskell) of the Bronte family Currer, Acton and Ellis Bell by Olga Peterson, which passed through Chekhov’s hands to Taganrog. The Prozorov girls are only the Brontës in transplanted from Yorkshire to Perm.

Other than intertextuality, critics in both Russia, America and Israel have tried to delve beneath the apparently rational dispassionate discourse of Chekhov’s narrators. They search for spirituality at an unconscious level. Part of this search was prompted by Chudakov’s ‘iaitsa’, two circles showing the overlap of belief in God and denial of God in which the
Chekhovian world can be located (it stems from the notebook entry on there being an enormous field between believing and not believing and that most Russians occupy only one corner of the field). Thus the myth of St George (based on the frequency of Egor and maiden-saving in Chekhov) is used as the first of a series of mythemes through which Chekhov can be better integrated with the spirituality of his predecessors and successors in Russian literature, just his equation of the priest (think of The Student or The Bishop with the writer) transmutes his work into something far more Leskovian. One should only be inhibited by the sound of Chekhov revolving in his grave: he did warn that yes, one day, books with titles like Turgenev and Tigers would actually be written (to be followed, no doubt, by Chekhov and Cheetahs, actually, given the unusual mating habits of cheetahs, one could write a paper on that).