Interview with Harai Golomb on his Book on the Poetics of Chekhov's Plays

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Professor Harai Golomb's academic activity is so often associated with Chekhov, that nobody was surprised when his *opus magnum* (so far), a book on Chekhov, finally appeared in 2014 (*A New Poetics of Chekhov's Plays: Presence through Absence*. Brighton, Chicago & Toronto: Sussex Academic Press [411 pages, including Appendices, Bibliography and Index]). This decades-long brainchild of his received great acclaim from leading Chekhov specialists, theatre and drama scholars, Slavists, semioticians, and comparative art scholars, Western and Russian alike. As an Israeli colleague-musicologist I am proud for our guild, and very much intrigued by interactions between various sciences and disciplines, including musicology, guiding this study. But first, let me quote a partial selection from some gratifying appreciations from reviews and endorsements of this work:

The late Benjamin Harshav (1928–2015), Professor Emeritus (Yale and Tel-Aviv Universities) of Literary Theory, Hebrew and Yiddish poetry, and Russian and Comparative Literature, and related fields, wrote:

> Harai Golomb is one of that exquisite breed, a Stradivarius among scholars. He knows how to unpack all the details, and weave them into a complex tapestry which reveals the full richness of whatever work of literature he chooses for his subject. His thorough, profound and innovative work on Chekhov is a model for teachers and students of how to read and extract the literariness of a text and how to construct a single author's poetics. This book is exemplary in its content and structure alike; it is the reward of many years of study, and an inimitable contribution to our understanding of Chekhov, and through him – of the very nature of literary and dramatic art.

Robert Louis Jackson, Professor (Emeritus) of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Yale University, and founding president of the North American Chekhov Society, wrote, *inter alia*:

> A Unique and extraordinary accomplishment. Professor Golomb's comprehensive and deep exploration of Chekhov's drama […] not only will raise the study of Chekhov drama and theatre to qualitatively new levels of scholarly and critical inquiry, but will powerfully impact upon the production, directing and acting of Chekhov plays.

Vladimir B. Katev, Professor of Russian Literature, Lomonosov State University, Moscow, and Chairman of the Chekhov Commission of the Russian Academy of Sciences, wrote, *inter alia*:

> The publication of Harai Golomb's revelatory book is a celebration for the world of Chekhov studies. […] it is as definitive as such a study can be. […] Its path-breaking theoretical insights complement its meticulous textual analyses. […] A masterpiece of its kind.

Patrice Pavis, Professor Emeritus of Sorbonne 8 (Paris), Author of many studies in the theory of drama and theatre, including *Dictionary of Theatre*, wrote, *inter alia*:

> Haraï Golomb's book is a work of art in itself: we enjoy it at every turn. It confirms and deepens our love for Anton Pavlovitch.

Cathy Popkin, Professor of Russian, Columbia University, and Editor of the Norton Critical Edition of Chekhov's selected stories, wrote, *inter alia*:

> Harai Golomb is the first to give an adequate account of the isomorphism of thematic and compositional workings that distinguishes Chekhov's dramatic project. This is more than illuminating; it is important. […] Golomb does greater justice to the justice Chekhov himself does to the complexity of the human condition, defined as it is by potentials, realized and unrealized alike. Golomb's argument […] is also remarkable for its methodological self-awareness. [He] keeps his cards on the table […] interrogating his own procedures. [...] What impresses me most is Golomb's sense of both nuance and power […] of how complex and elusive all […] relationships are, how dizzying the interpenetration of their respective parts, and how […] the components of each relationship effectively produce one another. No one reads Chekhov's dramas better.

Last but not least, in his Foreword to Harai Golomb's book, Prof. Donald Rayfield (Professor Emeritus of Russian literature at Queen Mary College, the University of London, and author, *inter alia*, of Chekhov's most comprehensive biography to date) characterises the effect of Golomb's approach as "a blast of fresh air" in the faces of its readers, and goes on:

> The fact that Golomb approaches Chekhov not as a Russianist or Slavist or comparativist, but from a background of musicology and the theories of drama and literature, aroused in the past suspicions among the supercilious and the conservative, but has been a source of inspiration for the open-minded. […] This is the best critical work on Chekhov I have read since Chudakov, and the broadest ever.

So much for the book's reception in the relevant academic communities.

M. R. So, the first question(s) will be Why literature, and why Chekhov?

H. G. First, I would like to make one thing clear, especially when being interviewed for *Min-Ad*: Academically, I am not really a musicologist, though I hold an MA-equivalent in music theory. Most of my publications are studies in literature, with special reference to prosody and drama (including specific studies of individual writers, playwrights, and poets, of various literatures). So the question "Why literature?" seems to be based on the implicit assumption that I am basically a full-fledged musicologist, who occasionally

chose to move into the study of literature, which is not the case; rather, the reverse is closer to reality. Let me mention in passing that my university position at Tel-Aviv University, before retirement, was divided (partly at different times and partly simultaneously) between departments of literature, theatre, musicology, and the programme for the interdisciplinary study of the arts. My written publications have almost exclusively focused on drama and literature, while my teaching and lecturing activities have included musicological subjects as well. In short, from my personal angle, I would expect a question like "why music?" sooner than "why literature?" That said, I am not particularly keen on such questions in the first place, as I am going to argue shortly.

Indeed, in a more general context, it is for good reason that a question about a scholar's choice of his/her major discipline is rarely asked. A scholar, or any professional, very often finds it difficult to answer a question like "Why did you choose to be a writer/scholar/painter/composer?" (of course, the same applies to other fields as well). I challenge any reader of this interview to ask and answer him/herself such questions. Very often we do not sense that we have chosen our calling/profession/field/object of interest, etc.; rather, we subjectively sense that it has chooses us... Usually, there is something in one's very nature, in one's intellectual and mental *DNA* – cognitive, emotional, biographical, etc. – that makes one especially interested in, receptive to, and/or inspired by, a profession, a discipline, an art, a science, etc., preferring it to others as closest to one's mind and heart. As for me, larger parts of my academic training and upbringing, as well as most of my published research and scholarly work, are in the fields of literature and drama, with some sub-specialisations (e.g., translation research and practice). Within this vast field of related disciplines I have researched the work of major Hebrew–Israeli authors, mainly 20th century poets (notably Natan Alterman, 1910–1970), as well as isolated studies of texts by Shakespeare and others in English. In addition, much of my work is dedicated to general–theoretical studies, not related to a particular writer, period, or national literature. In adopting this approach and these priorities in the study of literature I have been particularly inspired by the teachings of the late Prof. Benjamin Harshav [Hrushovski] (1928–2015). In parallel, in the study of music I have been particularly inspired by the teachings of the late Prof. Dalia Cohen (1926–2013). Both these two mentors of mine focused on matters of theory, structural principles, cognition and perception in their respective arts, rather than on a specific writer/composer, historical period, etc., though they did engage from time to time during their long careers on detailed illuminating studies of individual writers/composers (e.g., B. Harshav's studies of Tolstoy and Alterman, D. Cohen's studies of Bach and Arab music, to illustrate the breadth and variety of the scope of their respective contributions to theory and textual analysis alike; each of these separate though interconnected scholarly activities richly enhanced each other). Indeed, my particular attraction to Chekhov's art has not been inspired by his Russianness, or by his being a man of the 19th century, etc.; no wonder that he is the only Russian author whose work occupies a major, perhaps *the* major, part of my published work. My early fascination with his writings started with my childhood exposure to some of his stories, which I read

in Hebrew translation, eventually followed by first glimpses of the Russian original, read to me by my mother. This early attraction later developed into a passion when I read the major plays as a university postgraduate, in the course of an MA Comparative Literature seminar given in the mid-1960s by the late major Hebrew poet Prof. Leah Goldberg (1911–1970), who then headed the Department of Comparative Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Later, for the entire duration of my university teaching career (1968–2008), the Chekhov dramatic canon was a major subject in my academic and spiritual life, central to my teaching, lecturing, researching, publishing, etc. To the extent that a person is consciously aware of reasons for, and nature of, his/her attraction to a chosen object of study, I think that one of my major causes for being drawn to Chekhov's plays is his blend of subtlety and complexity in constructing his texts, his themes, and his fictionalised human worlds, with their personages, events, human and thematic networks of interrelationships, etc. At first I experienced all of that intuitively and subconsciously, later very consciously and analytically. As a scholar and literary analyst I was fascinated to discover and identify within his texts the origins of my earlier intuitive impressions. This is a very central component of my musicological curiosity as well. I have always tried to discover and pinpoint the sources of the effects that I experience as a reader, spectator, listener, etc., and locate them in the written work of art (or, in some cases, in its vocal and visual rendition by performing artists, be they actors, players, singers etc.); in other words, to analyse what makes an artistic text (literary, theatrical or musical) 'tick', or how the author/playwright/composer makes such a text work the way it does; to unearth the sometimes hidden mechanisms and strategies by which that author manipulates his/her addressees to respond to his work in a certain way; to characterise the process of art-perception as a cognitive interaction involving an author/addresser, a text/work of art, and a perceiver/addressee. To conclude: at a much younger age I answered my own question about my preferred discipline in the following way: whereas music perhaps contributes the most to me, I can contributes the most to literary studies; therefore I must give the latter prominence in my professional life.

This brings me to my musicological work, which has indeed been partial and marginal, comparatively, in terms of quantities of my written output (published research), but just as central in terms of my oral activities (teaching, lecturing, delivering conference-papers, etc.). My book on Chekhov, then, is of little purely-musicological interest, though it does have marginal musicological perspectives. I am afraid that the main, if not only, reason for interviewing me for *Min-Ad* about my Chekhov book does not relate to the book itself but to its author: it is a non-musicological work authored by an Israeli part-time musicologist…

M. R. Your book has so many aspects and angles that it would be helpful to know how you yourself define its major points and theses.

H. G. My book on Chekhov is indeed – as indicated by its title – an attempt to offer a comprehensive poetics of Chekhov the playwright (by the way, I will not dwell here on

why and how I chose this time to focus on his dramatic rather than his narrative work), characterising his specific uniqueness both "from within" and "from without".

M. R. Let us begin with "from within".

H. G. "From within" means meticulous analyses of his four major plays (*The Seagull*, *Uncle Vania*, *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*) on levels of scenes, events, personages, inter-personage relationships, themes and ideas, etc., and the exceptionally intricate ways in which various parts and components of each of these four plays interact with each other. Very many scenes in the plays are analysed in my book in great detail, from different and mutually-complementary angles and perspectives. Incidentally, those "from within" analyses include occasional reference to the role of music in particular scenes, but only to the extent that music functions in the arena of scene-construction, dialogue development, characterisation, etc., rather than as an autonomous art in its own right. In parallel, I also dwell on complementary contributions of stage design, lighting, and other non-verbal components of the text. The editors of *Min-Ad* have been generous enough to re-publish in this issue an early work of mine, a study of music's role in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. This article can demonstrate part of what I mean here in characterising my approach to analysing music's role in literary texts in general, as I applied it to a Chekhov play in my mid-1980s academic writing.

M. R. And "from without"?

H. G. This means placing Chekhov's artistic system in perspective, viewing it through various contrastive yet mutually-complementary comparisons, e.g.,: (1) with the work of other towering authors of various literatures and periods (e.g., Shakespeare, Ibsen, Beckett and others); (2) with the typical characteristics of major previously-established genres (*tragedy*, *comedy*, etc.); (3) with relevant trends in the history of drama, i.e., various "-*ism*s" (*realism*, *naturalism*, *symbolism*, *impressionism*, etc.); (4) with the artistic systems of three other giants of 19th century Russian literature (Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Gogol'); (5) with other arts (notably music, because of my own academic strengths and weaknesses: I am incomparably more versed in musicology than in the study of other non-verbal arts, but in principle Chekhov's art could be just as well compared and contrasted with other arts, notably visual ones, in studies to be carried out by other scholars and specialists).

The entire "from without" perspective is offered from two, again, mutually-complementary angles: historical–diachronical and a-chronical or pan-chronical. The former views Chekhov as a link in the historical chain of great authors of drama/theatre, compared–contrasted with his predecessors and successors. The latter shamelessly ignores the chronological–historical order, pretending, temporarily and merely for the sake of analysis, that all (or at least all major) works of art were created at the same time. It's a methodological strategy, even trick, to observe the intrinsic features and qualities of

artistic corpuses, as self-contained phenomena. In order to appreciate the artistic stature and value of a given corpus it is often necessary first to carry out such exercises, and then to combine these two seemingly mutually-exclusive and contradictory perspectives, the historical and the a-historical, and fuse then into a much more complex and unified all-round view. The target of such an exercise is primarily to offer a profile of a great artist's uniqueness and make it as complex, many-sided and comprehensive as possible, shunning over-simplification. In the process of such a characterisation, references to other comparable individuals and phenomena serve as mirrors that shed different and mutually-complementary lights, from different angles, on the central theme/person, through highlighting contrasts, analogies, similarities and differences between them. Thus, for instance, one can learn more, and in a more all-round way, about the work of Chekhov through comparing–contrasting it with the work of others, whether his contemporaries or compatriots or not.

M. R. Now, returning to "from within", I would ask you to elaborate on how this approach can provide detailed analyses of the very texture of Chekhov's plays. Any analyses, if we want them to work, should be subjected to our idea. What is the leading idea that shaped your analytical narrative?

H. G. I am not sure I fully understand what is meant by "our idea" in this context. I should hope that anything that analysts and researchers of texts or works of art (of course, including me) find or see in an analysed work of art (of course, including a Chekhov play) is not imposed on that work, or read into it as a pre-conceived idea that the text must, as it were, adhere to. On the contrary, whatever "idea" I may have about the text must be demonstrably rooted in that text, emerge or emanate from it. That said, I – and all other analysts, for that matter – inevitably have a personal frame of mind that gives rise to intuitive sensitivities to certain qualities in texts, which in the best case complements other sensitivities that other analysts of the same texts may have. Each such observer of a text is likely to be drawn to some qualities in it, to see them more readily, to attach to them more importance, etc., than others (i.e., both other observers and other qualities); each such an academic scholar must (willy-nilly) create his/her own hierarchies between what he/she regards as central or marginal. My own way of observing and analysing literary–dramatic works of art (and, to a certain extent, also musical ones, but that's beside the point here and deserves separate attention) tends to look for subtleties, complexities, and the explicit realisation of hidden or implicit potentials of various kinds, on various levels of the thematic and structural dimensions of that text. All of these are, *inter alia*, ways in which an author creates a fictional 'world' and communicates it to addressees (readers/spectators), manipulates their responses, attitudes, identifications, etc. On an altogether different level, academic scholars also create their *non-fictional* 'worlds', or models, that comprise their views of a given fictional–artistic text. This highly complex and elusive relationship between an artistic text, on the one hand, and an academic text that observes and analyses it, on the other hand, is also a subject that I have

tried to address in the book head-on, questioning my own positions and methodologies. I believe that this is an appropriate way to address the work of an author like Chekhov, in which presentations of questions is often more important, and certainly more credible, than attempts to answer them. Indeed, in a much quoted statement, Chekhov distinguishes "between a correct presentation of a question and giving an answer to it". Only the former, he maintains, is the artist's province.

Now one of the main features of Chekhov's oeuvre is the structural complexity of many of his works (this, partially though typically, accounts for my personal attraction to his art, since artistic complexity is perhaps the quality I always seek in texts that I analyse). He uses rich, tangled webs of dense interactions to connect relatively 'poor', depleted elements. Thus, uninteresting or 'weak' *répliqu*e**s** and seemingly banal personages become much richer and more meaningful through the interactions and analogies that connect them with each other, and – on a higher level of generalisation – with an overall superordinate idea of a category that they belong to (e.g., a theme, a general concept of a type of persons, a general concept of types of events, etc.).

Thus, Chekhov's perception of a relevant category – e.g., a (fictionalised) human being, a relationship, a theme, etc. – is very rarely stated explicitly. We, as his audience, his addressees, are given those rich networks of connections and analogies through which one 'weak' or 'poor' isolated instance (a banal formulation of an opinion, a seemingly meaningless event, a superficial or uninteresting personage, etc.), or of a category (ideas, events, personalities, etc., in general), relates to another, and this emerging relationship endows each of these seemingly depleted parts with richer meaning on their way to creating significant wholes. In other words, again: each element – be it a personage, a *réplique*, a statement of an opinion, a dialogical exchange, etc. – may be poor and uninteresting when examined in isolation; however, when networks of analogies and other relationships that connect between these elements or items are activated, not only these networks of connections, but also the elements connected by them, become denser, fuller, and incomparably more interesting and meaningful. Hence, analyses "from within" are so essential. Parts of the text shed light on each other, reciprocally; therefore, after noticing such light-shedding the addressee can no longer return to the relatively naïve way of looking at those isolated elements, and the complexity of perceiving and conceiving the entire text becomes much richer and more complex.

I know it all sounds very abstract, perhaps even enigmatic, without textual examples of isolated scenes, characters, relationships etc. My book is full of such examples, they actually dominate its text; but unfortunately the scope of this interview does not allow going into detailed textual analyses. Interested readers are invited to look for them and at them in the book.

M. R. Structural complexity is Chekhov's great tool. Still, the question is what is the idea behind this tool? What does it serve?

H. G. The late British Slavist and Chekhov-scholar Prof. Roland Hingley (1920–2010), translator and editor of the monumental book-series THE OXFORD CHEKHOV, said to

me that the most a Chekhov-scholar can achieve is "*A* key to Chekhov", since there can never be such a thing as "*THE* key to Chekhov". Using this dictum as a point of departure, one has to be convinced that there have to be several complementary keys, or rather several sets of keys, to the Chekhov phenomenon; I hope to have been lucky enough to find one such set. Thus, the book tries to pinpoint Chekhov's uniqueness by complementing (in fact, replacing) the traditional concept of "sub-text" – which is suggestive but vague and impressionistic – with more precise and focused analytical tools. Such tools are provided mainly through the concepts of "*presence through absence*" and "*unrealised potential*". "The idea behind" such tools is to present the human condition in its fullest and meaningful complexity; i.e., structural complexity, beside being "its own reward" as an enrichment of artistic experience, is also a tool to avoid over-simplification of the human condition as a whole.

M. R. The phrase "*Presence through Absence*" consists of key words in the book, even used as its subtitle.

H. G. Yes, indeed. In fact, personally, I regard *Presence through Absence* as the book's *title*, and *A New Poetics of Chekhov's Major Plays* as its subtitle. This is my original idea of a title for my book [as envisaged in my 1984 article about music in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, re-published in this issue of *Min-Ad*], and I still prefer it that way. The book's publisher, however, through the graphic arrangement of the major title-page, reversed my original hierarchy between title and subtitle, and I had no choice but to accept that, reluctantly. In a way, it's analogous to reversing the order between a subject and a predicate in a sentence. Anyway, the idea that I wanted to promote through this title is that in Chekhov's world and work absent elements are often, and characteristically, more 'important', more influential, more prominent, etc., than present ones. Using the word *through*, moreover, is very significant. The vacuum created by the very absence of a *specific* expected presence makes this presence 'stronger', more tangibly present, because the impact of surprise is more focused when something is clearly expected, and this strong expectation is frustrated by the absence of the expected. In Chekhov such absences are made present because, rather than in spite, of their very absence. The unsaid, the unspoken; the implicit; events that take place offstage in a play (i.e., absent from the audience's eyes); personages conspicuously missing from a scene or from an entire play; the response expected in a dialogue at a certain point but not uttered, replaced by a silence or something totally unexpected; etc. – all of these phenomena, and many more, create an aura of powerfully present absences.

As for absent personages, let's remember the enormous importance of General Prozorov, the father of the four siblings (three sisters and a brother) in *Three Sisters*, and the crucial presence of the dead-by-drowning seven-year-old Grisha in *The Cherry Orchard*. Both these personages had died long before the action of the respective plays began, but their impact on the present personages, and on members of the audience (readers and spectators), is often even more powerful than most of those present

personages and what they say explicitly on stage. These are just two out of a large number of examples.

M. R. And "unrealised potential"? Chekhov was not the first in Russia to mourn "superfluous people" and "Oblomovs".

H. G. First of all, my conceptual models of 'unrealised potentials' and 'presence through absence' are not identical with 'superfluous people', just as they are not at ease with some other traditional terminology, like the time-honoured 'subtext', to which I have just referred. May I reiterate: the formerly mentioned (and older) terms do not contradict or invalidate the latter-mentioned (and newer) ones, but they are differently meaningful and structured, the basic difference between them being that my terms are structurally conceived and oriented, functioning within structured systems, whereas the traditional terms resonate thematically and even emotionally rather than structurally. My terminology is not designed to negate or undermine the old one; rather, it sets its predecessor aside, letting it rest on its laurels with well-earned respect, while aiming to replace it with different conceptual frameworks, which claim to be more focused and precise. These older, traditional terms and terminologies were for sure fruitful and suggestive, even inspiring, in the past, and are still valid today. However, they do not offer a solid basis for a motivated return to the text itself and look at its details in order to show how they relate to each other to construct a meaningful whole. I would characterise the latter procedure as a revelatory substantiation of precise and focused intuitions, rather than taking them for granted merely because they seem to be convincing in their initial vague and nebulous state.

Second, Chekhov indeed was not the first to portray "superfluous people" in *Russian literature*, but most probably the first to do that in *world drama and theatre*. There is something 'undramatic' about such unrealised potentials if we consider the concept of 'drama' in its pre-Chekhov state, where most personages usually engage in conflicts and bring their clashes to a head in front of an audience. By contrast, non-conflictual, or at least somewhat marginally-conflictual relationships that typically obtain between Chekhov's personages are not considered, traditionally, as (to paraphrase the last sentence in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*) "such stuff as plays are made on"; they are, as it were, such stuff as narrative, rather than drama, is "made on". This is a major reason why many critics, from Chekhov's day to the present (including Chekhov himself in the first years of his activity as a playwright), tended to criticise him for lack of dramaticality. One of Chekhov's innovations as a playwright was indeed to populate lists of plays' *dramatis personae* with such inactive people. Their inactivity contributes decisively to the creation of Chekhov's typical suspense between specific, well-defined potentials and their non-realisations.

That said, this is not the main point here. One of the book's major theses is that there is *isomorphism* between Chekhov's thematics and compositional techniques. Thus, his personages are mainly creators of unrealised potentials, rather than vaguely

'superfluous'. Thematically, Chekhov focuses on humanly unrealised personages, on unrealised potentials in the functioning of work, love, education, communication, and other components of human life, on expected potential events that do not actually happen, etc. Structurally, he constructs his texts as chains of *potentials* (mainly expectations) followed by their frustrating *non-realisations*. This isomorphism is not at all a foregone conclusion. One can easily imagine a fictional text organised as such a chain of frustrated expectations within the text-to-reader arena, while the personages that carry the action (or rather, all too often in Chekhov, the tense inaction) within its fictional world are not frustrated, not characterised by the non-realisation of their human potentials. In parallel, one can just as easily imagine a fictional text whose personages are frustrated, unfulfilled people, while the text itself fulfils most of its readers' narrative expectations. A typical Chekhov text is characterised by this isomorphism: its personages experience the *unrealisability* of their human potentials and dreams, and its readers/spectators experience the *non-realisation* of their expectations as addressees. Note that the asymmetrical use of the terms *unrealisability* and *non-realisation* in the previous sentence is intentional: Chekhov's presents a world in which human beings, as such, are *doomed* not to realise their human potentials, whereas as a writer he *chooses* not to realise textual potentials that can, potentially, be realised. This isomorphism and this asymmetry reinforce the inescapable effect of unresolved tension, like a grey sunless sky in which clouds keep gathering endlessly without producing any rain. Let me reiterate, finally, that the potential is there, unrealised as it is; moreover, it only gains strength and potency because it will not and cannot be realised.

M. R. How does this quality in Chekhov's poetics fit into the history of drama?

H. G. This question belongs to the very core of the "from without" perspective through which my book examines the Chekhov phenomenon (complementing the "from within" perspective). Historically, pre-Chekhov drama is largely characterised by *realised potentials*, whereas post-Chekhov drama (mainly "absurd" theatre) is largely characterised by the *absence of potentials*. Chekhov's poetics – in contrast to its predecessors and successors alike – powerfully develops potentials that crave in vain for realisation, and are not annulled by the failure to realise them. The permanently unresolved tension between a powerfully present potential and the hopeless impossibility to realise it lies at the very core of Chekhov's world and art.

M. R. Only a gun realises its potential…

H. G. Indeed… But a gun on the wall relates and refers to the non-verbal level of Chekhov's plays, and it is a typical quality of Chekhov as a playwright (as distinguished from his nature as a storyteller). Chekhov's celebrated "gun-rule" also relates to his highly motivated choice of elements and the inescapable ways of making them into links in tight chains. Naturally, I discuss this matter, as other ones (whether brought up in this

interview or not) in much greater detail in the book. One cannot do justice to a 400-page book in an inevitably incomparably-shorter interview. Thus, in the book I focus on Chekhov's use of the specifically theatrical interaction between verbal and non-verbal components of the theatrical medium. The book stresses that Chekhov's specific greatness as a playwright results, to a great extent, from the masterful interactions that he creates between verbal and non-verbal components of the theatre, irreducible to any other medium (mainly, irreproducible in narrative prose). A theoretical implication of this characterisation of Chekhov is that dramatic conflict is less crucial to the uniqueness of drama than some theorists have us believe. Moreover, Chekhov's drama is not as conflict-less as it seems; rather, its conflicts often take place *within personages*, even *within the minds of spectators*, rather than *between* personages.

M. R. All this somehow echoes a non-linear approach in reflecting reality that was typical of Baroque-era artists.

H. G. This point relates to several issues close to my heart. Let me begin by introducing my book's multi-layered structure, rather than Chekhov's own (to which I'll return presently). I hope to have produced some degree of isomorphism there as well, but the two are basically different and autonomous: artistic–fictional verbal discourse and academic rhetoric, both inescapably linear, are inevitably separate entities, though they may reflect each other in an inaccurate way.

My book is organised in two concentric circles: inner and outer (conceptually, this echoes the "from within" and "from without" perspectives). The outer one consists of chapters 1 and 2 that open the book, and chapters 10 and 11 that close it. Here Chekhov's poetics and world are viewed, as it were, from a distant perspective. Chapter 1 outlines the principles of his thematics ("what?"), and chapter 2 outlines the principles of his structural–compositional techniques ("how?"). Chapter 10 provides the outer perspectives of trends ("-*isms*", e.g., *realism*, *naturalism*, etc.), genres (*comedy*, *tragedy*, etc.), and historical poetics (Chekhov's poetics' position between the artistic systems of his predecessors and successors), as well as the perspective of aesthetic evaluation (asking if, and how, Chekhov's *greatness* can be established 'objectively'); chapter 11 ("Chekhov and Posterity") ends the book by providing the perspective of Chekhov's future, starting with our 20th century past (i.e., his nearer future), which spills over to include our 21st century present and the perspectives of the more distant future, in other words, what we in the first decades of the 21st century perceive as future (the book's very last sentence says "for the 20th century, for the 21st, and beyond"). This last chapter discusses questions like How do Chekhov's world and poetics view the future? How does the future (i.e., our recent past, our present, and **our** future) view now, and would view in the future, the world and poetics of Chekhov's plays? So far the book's outer circle.

The book's inner circle is its heart. Viewing Chekhov's art from his own texts, it is based on close, detailed and systematic analyses. It begins with discussions of the beginnings of the four major plays (chapter 3) and ends with discussions of their endings

(chapter 9). In between these two framing chapters, major aspects of Chekhov's world and artistic system are discussed.

M. R. How would you summarise major elements and functions of his artistic system, as you present them in your book?

H. G. First of all *dramaticality* and *theatricality* – i.e., the role of drama and theatre in Chekhov's oeuvre, complemented by the role of Chekhov in the history of world drama and theatre, and how and why Chekhov's plays are truly theatrical and dramatical, in spite of views to the contrary (chapter 4). Then comes a discussion of *character* and *characterisation* (who?) – i.e., some character traits of "The [typical] Chekhov character" and the author's techniques of *reciprocal characterisation*, where personages serve as mirrors for each other, characterising each other through analogies, similarities and differences (chapter 5). This is followed by a discussion of *communication* – i.e., when, how, to what extent, and under what conditions, Chekhov's *dramatis personae* do (or do not) communicate with each other, and how Chekhov, as the source of the authorial voice, communicates with us (perceivers–addressees, i.e., readers and spectators) through the personages, and with them, against their will and behind their backs, etc. (chapter 6). The next chapter discusses *emotional restraint* – i.e., how Chekhov shapes this central feature of his art, and makes it so powerful and so unmistakably "Chekhovian" (chapter 7). Next comes a discussion of "philosophising", ideas/ideologies and values – again, how Chekhov shapes these features of his artistic world and conveys his values through analogies, complementary perspectives, etc. (chapter 8).

The book's tight structure, then, is designed to support its claim for a comprehensive view of Chekhov's poetics as an integrated whole system.

M. R. What is the role of music in your understanding of Chekhov?

H. G. Music serves as a structure-based mirror, which draws attention – through analogies and parallels – to music-like structuration techniques employed by Chekhov. My 1984 article, re-published in this issue of *Min-Ad*, is a much earlier attempt to look at music, *inter alia*, as a structural model for understanding some aspects of Chekhov's art. It is not claimed that Chekhov himself was aware of possible analogies between his techniques and musical ones. For all I know, he hardly had formal music education, certainly not musicological training in the analysis of counterpoint and polyphony. It is even more amazing, then, that without formal knowledge in music theory his mind managed to produce structural thinking that makes the textual organisation of his plays analogous to the way creators of musical complexity and polyphony, mainly in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, created their multi-layered musical edifices.

My main discussion of music in relation to Chekhov's plays, then, is based on a distinction between the following terms/concepts: *the simple, the complicated* and *the complex*, and within the latter – between 'saturated' and 'non-saturated' types of

complexity. This matter, too, is discussed at considerable length in my book, and I am compelled to present it here in an oversimplified nutshell.

Basically, I would like to subsume the elementary *dichotomy* distinction between *the simple* and *the complex* under a more elaborate *trichotomy*, where the latter concept is subdivided into "*the complex*" vs. "*the complicated*". Structurally, this trichotomy is roughly analogous to the one between *maximum*, *optimum* and *minimum*, or between *many*, *a few/a little*, and *few/little*. The *complicated* can tolerate more and more elements, more and more connections between them, and more and more types of connection between elements, potentially endlessly, without regard to the limitations of the mind and brain of perceivers/addressees. In music that would mean, *in principle*, creating polyphonic textures of tens, even hundreds (the sky is the limit) of voices interpenetrating each other, so that no normal human listener can even begin to absorb and make musical sense of it all. The likely resulting effect of a truly-complicated structure and texture on perceivers is one of disorientation and despair: the text or work of art is so complicated, that its perceivers lose hope of ever integrating in their minds the incessant, overwhelming flood of information that keeps pouring in. The *complex*, however, checks and balances the *complicated* against the cognitive and perceptual limitations of the human brain, by introducing some elements and mechanisms of *simplicity* into the fabric of the whole, making it clearer to perceive. Indeed, the author of a complex text takes care to provide it with such qualities as (relative) clarity, transparency, sense of balance, etc., that make it clearer, more comprehensible, more appealing and intriguing (as opposed to formidable and prohibitive) to the addressee; effects of despair and boredom are thus replaced by effects of fulfilment, interest, satisfaction (in succeeding to process the complex text), etc.

Within the complex, a distinction is offered between *saturated* and *non-saturated* types. Saturated complexity borders on the complicated, but still strives to encourage the addressee to experience and understand it: it aims at communicability; on the contrary, the complicated in its purest manifestations does not care about communication. As for the further sub-division: *non-saturated complexity* is more sensitive to what is processable by the human brain. This difference is in quantity rather than quality; yet, at its clearest and most typical manifestations, a quantity-difference tends to become qualitative.

Here I am suggesting an analogy between music and literature/drama. *Saturated complexity* is typical of baroque polyphony (a most striking example would be Bach) and of Shakespeare's textual techniques (which I am not going to illustrate in this interview), on the one hand, and renaissance polyphony (typically, Palestrina) and Chekhov's structural and thematic techniques, on the other hand. Let me stress that these analogies are strictly structural. There is little, if any, similarity between Palestrina and Chekhov in any other context. Of course I cannot even begin to substantiate this claim here. Without providing any evidence, then, I am suggesting that in Bach's and in Shakespeare's saturated complexity, the strength of the whole is the by-product of the strength of its isolated component parts, whereas in Palestrina's and Chekhov's non-saturated

complexity the strength of the complex whole is the by-product of the weakness of its component parts, strongly interconnected in the structures and textures of the whole text; this type of strength grows *at the expense of* the weakness of the parts. Earlier on in this interview I characterised Chekhov's way of gleaning interest and meaningfulness of wholes from uninteresting and depleted parts. Music can serve as a contrastive mirror reflecting this idea about Chekhov, by juxtaposing Bach's typical polyphony with Palestrina's in analogy to contrasting Chekhov with Shakespeare. Let me emphatically reiterate that this entire argument is totally structural, actually having nothing to do with the respective thematic, semantic, emotional (etc.) worlds and artistic systems of any of the four great creators of art here mentioned. In Bach, typically, an isolated voice or theme in a fugue, for instance, is potentially independent, and can provide the listener with sufficient inner relationships to make it interesting in its own right. When combined with other simultaneous voices, each being just as complex in isolation, the complexity of the whole grows more and more with every such addition or combination. By contrast, in Palestrina, typically, isolated voices are likely not to arouse interest in their own right, but they are so intricately interwoven into the work's whole fabric that the end result is intriguing and fascinating. Bach's and Shakespeare's wholes are built on the potential *independence* of their parts; Palestrina's and Chekhov's wholes are built on the *interdependence* or their parts. Both types of complexity, though, share the ideal of potential equality, or at least equilibrium, between isolated component-elements, none of which can 'stand on its own two feet' as an autonomous unit of text. In music, the ideal is that there is no clear distinction between 'main melody' and 'accompaniment'. A comparable analogy in literature and drama (though a **very** tricky one) would be blurring the distinction between 'major protagonists' and 'secondary personages'. Another analogy, an even more non-thematic one, is between textural elements as components of the whole: in music, the relative importance of pitch vs. duration vs. timbre; in more structural terms, the relative importance of melody and harmony, vs. rhythm, vs. orchestration, etc. Different ideas and ideals of complexity would try to make one or more of such elements more conspicuous and prominent than others. *Interdependence*, as an ideal, would make the isolated elements bound together in *non-saturated complexity equally* weak, but would make the 'binding-together' strategies themselves stronger, more intense, more elaborate (simpler models, as homophonic textures in music and more loosely structured literary texts, and/or texts with very few strong elements accompanied by weak ones that carry little weight of their own, are beside the point in this particular discussion, but they certainly deserve special treatment, focusing on less structural sources for interest and signification). This is a very broad and grossly oversimplified summary of the main ways in which my book uses musical analogies in an attempt to clarify some features of Chekhov's unique type of complexity.

M. R. To sum up this interview, how would you characterise, in a nutshell if possible, Chekhov's uniqueness and your attempt to understand it in your book? Would you relate

such an attempt to the famous last words of *Three Sisters*, «Если бы знать» ["If We Could Know"]?

H. G. Let me start as follows: Chekhov is presented in this book as someone who stands for hours before a mirror trying to appear dishevelled... this carefully designed, misleading effect of seeming carelessness is indeed part of his elusive complexity. One of my book's major missions is to analyse, expose and confront this elusiveness, to render it clearer without 'ruining' it through oversimplification. I hope to have contributed to a comparatively better elucidation and understanding of the Chekhov phenomenon (which I call in the book *Chekhovism*). A full understanding of this phenomenon – i.e., cracking the entire *DNA* code of an author's artistic system – is tantamount to finding THE key to Chekhov, to re-use Ronald Hingley's illuminating terms; the impossibility of attaining this goal is comparable to the unreachability of a horizon. We may get nearer to it, but not to reach it, yet our knowledge of its unreachability does not deter us from striving to get as nearer to it as possible.

This, in essence, is the spirit in which Chekhov ends his *Three Sisters*: his "Если бы знать" (often rendered in English as "If we could know", but perhaps could more accurately be rendered as "if it were possible to know", or "if one could know", both of which sound awkward and contrived in English) means, that (a) we don't know now; (b) we will never know in the future; and (c) we know, have always known, and will always know that we did not, do not, and will never know. Yet, this does not stop us from desperately and passionately knowing, that (d) we *want* to know, in spite of the knowledge that this wish doomed never to be realised.

It is without Chekhov's consent that I apply his "If we could know" to a Chekhov-scholar's yearning to fully *know* everything about the secrets of Chekhov's art; yet the analogy almost begs to be extended this way, because the challenge of fully understanding great art is analogous to the challenge of fully understanding life and the world. Both are inescapable, and both are unachievable. To be human, says Chekhov – typically, implicitly-yet-powerfully – is to always carry on the unquenchable and unfulfillable thirst for knowledge. The inherently tense, permanently suspenseful and unresolvable balance between these two conflicting forces, both of which are typically unique to humans, is the very core of the irreducible complexity of the poetics of Chekhov, both as an observer of the human condition and as a supreme creator of works of art.